

# TPRS in a Year!

Written by Ben Slavic  
in association with Susan Gross



The author wishes to acknowledge the extensive contributions of Susan Gross to the accuracy of information in this text, as well as those of Amy Bachman Catania and Karen Rowan in editing the text. Thanks also to Lisa Myles, principal of Summit Ridge Middle School in Littleton, CO. Strong administrative support of new views on teaching makes necessary change a lot easier.

TPRS in a Year! 4th edition.

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“For those of you who don't know Ben Slavic, his *middle school* students placed 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 in the state of Colorado *high school* National French Contest. His top kid was second in the nation. Those top five kids were all national placers.”

“I got your book today. Great job! This is all about doing what is best for teachers. I think your book is marvelous and will be a great help. I believe...that it can have a great influence for good.”

- Blaine Ray

“Your detailed description of how to teach using Blaine Ray's materials is absolutely fantastic. We have needed something like this for ages. You really show us how to do it! I love the way you explain the thought process, how to stay focused, and how to decide when to stop circling.”

- Susan Gross

“Ben, you made her [an observing teacher] look through the telescope and she will never be the same. You are a star! Thank you.”

- Dale Crum

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## INTRODUCTION

This text has been developed for teachers who wish to sharpen their skills in teaching with TPRS - Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Stories®.

TPRS requires work on the part of the teacher. It requires an emotional as well as an intellectual commitment. Breaking old habits is never easy. It takes courage. Yet the rewards for those who make the effort are considerable. Teaching well with TPRS makes teaching the rewarding experience it is meant to be.

TPRS brings a sense of play into the classroom. Chris Mercogliano, writing in "Paths of Learning" (Issue #17, p. 12, 2004), states that there is considerable evidence for "a classical link between education and play." He points out that the ancient Greek words for education/culture (paideia), play (paidia), and children (paides) all have the same root.

Chris asks us to consider the following remarkable conversation in Plato's Republic between Socrates and Plato's brother, Glaucon:

"Well, then," Socrates begins, "the study of calculation and geometry, and all the preparatory education required for dialectic, must be put before them as children and the instruction must not be given the aspect of a compulsion to learn."

"Why not?" asks Glaucon.

"Because the free man ought not to learn any study slavishly. Forced labors performed by the body don't make the body any worse, but no forced study abides in the soul."

"True."

"Therefore, you best of men, don't use force in training the children in the subjects, but rather play. In that way can you better discern toward what each is naturally directed."

Some teachers don't see themselves as playful. Yet TPRS is so strong and supple that it easily accommodates individual teacher preferences. It can be adapted to anyone and anything, even the textbook. The waters of TPRS are so deep that individuals will always "land the fish" they want. When applied to traditional methods, TPRS always strengthens them.

The ideas herein represent TPRS as perceived by the author. They are not intended to be exhaustive. Yet every effort was made to articulate and stay within currently accepted TPRS ideas at the time of this writing (2007). The goal of this book is to help get TPRS working as fast as possible for anyone new to the method.

To truly learn the method quickly, however, and not over a period of years, there is no better option than to get a mentor and become an apprentice. Meg Villanueva has said this about coaching:

No matter how many years, how many sessions, how many conferences you have been to, you need to be coached. Even those of us with many years under our belt [need] coaching. We can always get better.

Certainly, the most successful TPRS teachers are those who have other TPRS teachers around them and who observe and coach each other regularly. Research has shown that when athletes, artists, surgeons and professionals in many other fields coach each other, they become much better at what they do.

In this writer's struggle to learn the method, watching Jason Fritze teach Spanish in a Fluency Fast workshop for four to five hours each day for a week was invaluable. To develop your TPRS skills, you may want to go to [www.fluencyfast.com](http://www.fluencyfast.com) and find a workshop in a language other than the one you teach. Experiencing first hand what you want your students to experience is a great way to learn TPRS.

This book, then, can be adjunctive, but not primary, to your learning the method, because TPRS is something that must be experienced physically to be learned.

Doing TPRS well resembles juggling a number of balls in the air. As soon as each ball, or TPRS skill, is 'up in the air,' the attention must then go to another ball. Thus, in this book, only one TPRS skill is presented per week. *You are advised to focus on and use only those skills that work for you.* This approach allows the skills you have chosen to be integrated fairly quickly into a natural TPRS teaching style that is unique to you.

On the topic of skill development, Nikki McDonald in Omaha recently wrote on the TPRS listserv (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/moretprs>):

Many others have commented on how useful your reminder about [this technique] was - I used it today in class with success similar to yours. But what struck me about your post was the implication that you have a weekly teaching goal that you share with the students. By selecting and stating a goal and working towards it by asking for the support of your students, you are sending the message that everyone is a work in progress and that we can all improve. What more important message is there to send?

You will find that this openness with your students, this statement of your intention to learn a difficult but rewarding way of teaching, will be met with good will. Teachers who attempt to use TPRS from a place of control and power will find that the method is much more elusive than when it is used from a place of shared endeavor, of working together toward a common goal.

That is what you do with the students when you create a story anyway. If you ask students to participate with you, instead of competing with you, they will do so. *When the students know that they are a part of something new and exciting in education, they respond in kind.* The process becomes you *and* the class and not you

*versus* the class. True learning is not only playful; it is reciprocal and participatory. This is most especially true in languages.

It is strongly suggested that you make a conscious effort to write down how each step is working for you at the end of each week. Do this in the spaces provided at the end of each skill description, using the back of the sheet, or use a journal. There is something very powerful about self-evaluative writing. This book has been designed to speed up the process of learning TPRS, and writing is a big part of that.

Do not let fear of not being good enough at TPRS in your first year prevent you from acting on these suggestions. TPRS is not for the faint-hearted, but then neither is teaching. The fact that you are trying means you will succeed, because, like learning a foreign language, TPRS is really just about repetition, like learning to ride a bike. Suddenly one day you are doing it! Those breakthrough days are great days. They even have a name – homerun days!

It is now time for many teachers, experienced or inexperienced at TPRS, to take our rightful place in the profession of foreign language teaching. We are part of something big, something revolutionary. It is true that educators should feel free to choose what methods they want for their students, but *not at the expense of the students*. By choosing TPRS and making the commitment to master it, you are taking a major step forward to doing *what is best for students*.

To quote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry:

If you want someone to build a boat, don't tell them to gather wood, and assign them other tasks and work. Instead, teach them to long for the immensity of the sea.

It is the opinion of this writer that no method of foreign language instruction creates an environment that drives students to long for the “immensity of the sea” (authentic acquisition) as much as TPRS. The proof of this will be in the reactions of your students themselves once you have become proficient at the method. You will be pestered for “more stories” whenever you take a hiatus from them.

The following sentence, often heard in TPRS circles, sums it up: “Even *bad* TPRS is better than no TPRS!” May this book help you achieve *good* TPRS in your classroom in just one year!

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## THE SKILLS

How you develop your own skills in TPRS is completely up to you. Some teachers who are adept at the method use very few of the skills listed below. Others use quite a few. We suggest that you simply try each one for a week or two, and keep the ones that enhance your students' learning.

The skills you keep will be the ones with which *you* resonate and the ones that make *you* comfortable. As Michael Thompson says about the TPRS skills, we should use only those which work for us as “individual teaching artists”. Perfectly said!

Some skills have been placed at the end of the list as fun skills. Their primary purpose is to help you to inject a sense of fun and laughter into the classroom, and you may resonate with some of them. As you practice each skill, of course, you will always be working from your base of the three steps of TPRS: establishing meaning, asking a story, and reading.

In Step One, establishing meaning, you do some or all of the following things:

1. At the beginning of each class you *write the words for the story* on the board with their translations. These are called structures. You explain these structures in English to the students without expansion or pontification, and with no comments about grammar, as tempted as you may be to do so. You start each class this way.
2. Next, you *sign and gesture* the structures. The purpose of signing and gesturing (described as skill 1 below), is to give the students some practice with the structures for the day. This can include TPR, word association games, both visual and auditory, and just about anything that helps the learner establish instant recall of the meaning of the word or structure.
3. Next, of course, comes the wonderful period referred to as PQA, or Personalized Questions and Answers (described as skill 2 below). PQA is the high road to success in TPRS. Not only does it embellish the structures via lively personal interaction with the students in the target language, it forms a bridge into stories, guaranteeing their personalization.

The Step One skills serve the important function of giving the students auditory practice with the words to which they were just introduced. When they are done, Step Two (the story) is a lot easier for students to understand. On any given day, you choose to employ as many or as few of the Step One skills as you wish. Establishing meaning can be done in many ways. It is your decision entirely.

The Step One skills of signing/gesturing and PQA are really nothing more than *optional practice activities* that are designed to activate the words for the day in the

minds of the students. They set up the telling of the story. They give the written words on the board a sort of “auditory life” before the story.

It makes sense! If you think about it, the structures *aren't easy for the kids*. They have never heard them before. They *just saw them* on the board, and they could probably use some practice *hearing them* a little before you start the story! So the first step of TPRS *activates* the structures for the day.

The second step of TPRS is asking the story. As you become more and more familiar with the method, you will develop a rapport with certain of the skills listed below. Over time, you will use those skills to create your own kind of storytelling, a version that reflects your own personality and interests.

There is no one right way to establish meaning (Step One) nor is there one right way to ask a story (Step Two). Both steps are interpreted by the individual teacher in their own way. The teacher accepts or rejects the various skills found in this book as relevant and useful or not.

When choosing from the skills suggested in this book, ask yourself one question: *Does this skill help me achieve comprehensible input (CI) and personalization (P)?* Comprehensible input and personalization are the two pillars on which all TPRS classes find an unshakable foundation.

In fact, according to some TPRS experts, CI and P are the *only requirements for acquisition to occur*. If a skill does not help you achieve comprehensible input and personalization, it is probably worth skipping, or examining later.

Trying to learn too many skills too fast is to not see the forest for the trees, and should be avoided. The forest (CI + P) is vast and rich enough by itself. Preoccupation with any one tree (skill) or group of trees is not that important.

What is the nature of this forest we are describing as comprehensible input plus personalization? It is simple. With comprehensible input we reach into our students' minds; with personalization we connect with their hearts. Both are necessary for success.

When we provide CI, but fail to assure that its content reflect the individual needs and personalities of the students, we fail. On the other hand, any classroom that does not include massive and daily amounts of comprehensible input will fail as well. Only with both CI and P can we achieve a mind/heart balance in our classrooms and supercharge our students capacity to authentically acquire the target language.

The skills in *TPRS in a Year!* are grouped into three areas, which offer a working blueprint for the novice TPRS instructor:

- Step One skills are those needed by the instructor to be effective in Step One of TPRS. They are basic skills that directly address how to do comprehensible input and personalization. They include skills #1 through #15.
- Step Two skills address the creation of a story. They include skills #16 through #25. It is suggested that the novice teacher first learn the Step One skills before moving on to the more advanced Step Two skills. Doing this keeps the TPRS learning curve simple and manageable.
- The Fun Skills, #26 through #49, are advanced, optional, skills, but are easy to learn. They can be added to the teacher's repertoire at a rate of speed that is comfortable, and only if the teacher resonates with them.

French will be used as the default language to explain skills, but the English will be provided as well.

## **Step One Skills: Establishing Meaning and Personalizing**

*Skills #1 through #15 are basic skills required to do Step One of TPRS, establishing meaning. Most of them also directly address personalization.*

### **Skill #1: Signing/Gesturing**

After you have written and explained the words for the story on the board with their translations but without expansion or pontification, and with no comments about grammar, you have the option of moving into signing and gesturing.

Signing or gesturing the words “pumps up” the students. Much more than merely teaching meaning, it immediately builds a sense of trust through fun.

Imagine that it is the beginning of class and you have just written *a dansé/danced*. Students agree on a sign for *danced* and then sign or gesture it when you say it.

Next structure: *n'avait pas de chaussures/didn't have any shoes*. Students agree on a sign for *didn't have* and *shoes*, and then sign it when you say it.

Next, simply say the expressions with lots of quick repetitions as they sign. Have a grin on your face. Enjoy yourself. Play a memory game with your students. Monitor the barometer student, the slower one who tries (see skill 9).

First sign one structure, then two together, then do the same *with students' eyes closed* to check for acquisition. If students can sign the words with their eyes closed, they know it. If they can't, they don't know it, and they need more practice.

Many TPRS teachers don't use this skill, finding that they are able to establish meaning quickly and directly without it. However, when done as described above, this skill brings to the mix of a TPRS class some wonderful things:

1. Meaning is put into the students' *bodies* via the TPR involved, and not just their minds. As such, it is more deeply acquired and thus easier to access later in class during the contextual flow of the story.
2. Gesturing is a fun memory game, and it creates an upbeat mood in the classroom right away. The classes start with laughter and interest, since it is a game.
3. With the “eyes closed” aspect of signing and gesturing, the message is sent that *every student* is going to have to show knowledge of the structures:

*“That's great, class! Almost all of us have it, but there are still a few who need a little more practice with eyes closed!”* The message is:

*“We will all learn in this class.”*

Cynthia Payton once posted on the moretpers list serve from an article in *Science Daily* (July 28, 2007) about the work of Susan Wagner Cook in using hand gestures to teach new concepts. The research indicated that using hand gestures dramatically improves the ability to retain that concept. (Credit: Richard Baker, University of Rochester) It turned out to have “a more dramatic effect than Cook expected.

In her study, 90 percent of students who had learned algebraic concepts using gestures remembered them three weeks later. Only 33 percent of speech-only students who had learned the concept during instruction later retained the lesson. And perhaps most astonishing of all, 90 percent of students who had learned by gesture alone - no speech at all - recalled what they'd been taught."

The link to that article and one that is similar is provided here:

<http://www.futurepundit.com/archives/004434.html>

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/11/071104191551.htm>

Signing and gesturing:

- ✓ employs proven ways of increasing memory
- ✓ gives auditory practice on the structures
- ✓ establishes that the class will be fun
- ✓ sends the message that the teacher is fully in charge of the classroom.

All the other skills become easier and the class becomes easier to teach simply because of the mood, the overall effect, that signing and gesturing creates.

Avoid telling the students what you think the sign should be. Ask them to come up with their own offerings. Attention is drawn to certain kids as we look at what they offer (which can approach slapstick), and invariably we laugh, and camaraderie is created instantly.

At that point, if you feel that the students are ready to go into the story, you can do so. Or, if you prefer, you can continue to “work” the structures with some PQA or extended PQA activities. Remember to keep signing and gesturing short.

**Skill #1:** Are you signing the words? Your comments on how this works for you:

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## **Skill #2: PQA**

PQA stands for “Personalized Questions and Answers”. The choice to use PQA depends entirely on the personality of the teacher. Many teachers skip it. Some thrive on it, often to the exclusion of the story.

PQA normally follows the explanation of the words on the board unless you gesture the words, in which case it follows that activity. Note that even if you sign the words, you have used up only a few minutes of the class period at this point. PQA, on the other hand, can take longer. If it picks up energy, it can take up the entire class period. If it loses energy, the instructor moves right into a story.

From the structures presented above, one would ask in this case in the present tense, “Who dances?” and when you find out that “Jessie dances!” you express that you are very happy to learn this important information.

Immediately, this personalizes the class. Without personalization classes tend to drag. Students are always most interested in things that directly concern them, with the added bonus that personalization makes it *much easier to establish comprehensible input*.

Many gifted TPRS teachers don’t even care if they ever get to a story. They focus on providing comprehensible, interesting, and repetitive input via PQA. They engage the kids in talk about themselves. At this stage, finding out about the students is the primary goal, and so it is expected that the structures be put on the back burner in the interest of connecting with the kids.

These little conversations in PQA can really be helpful to the novice teacher because they don’t involve the pressure of trying to make a full-blown story happen. For some, PQA is frustrating and difficult. For others, it is at the heart of TPRS.

Blaine has said this about personalizing the class:

I believe people who are the most effective at TPRS don't tell stories. They ask questions, pause, and listen for cute answers from the students. The magic is in the interaction between the student and teacher. TPRS is searching for something interesting to talk about. That is done by questioning. Interesting comprehensible input is the goal of every class. If we are there to tell a story, we will probably not make the class interesting. We will be so focused on getting the story out that we won't let the input from the kids happen.

Thus, if someone in the class dances, or is dancing in the talent show next week, etc. the teacher makes this a discovery of supreme importance! Remembering that the structure must be repeated as many times as possible for the planned story to work well, the instructor would want to know when the talent show is, how long the

person has danced, what color their dancing shoes are, if the person dances often, etc.

The repetition of words that have to do with dancing is comprehensible input. They make the words of the actual story, told later, easy to understand. Remember, doing comprehensible input and personalizing the class are the only two requirements for acquisition to occur, and you are doing both when you do PQA.

One of the added benefits of doing PQA is that it gives students practice in first and second person singular verb forms, whereas stories are largely told in the third person.

Once each student in the class has his or her identity as an equestrian, a wrestler, an accordion player, a runner, etc. you can compare them to each other. You can come back to their identities over and over during stories, comparing your students to characters in stories, popular celebrities, sports stars, musicians, etc.

To have an identity, to be known by others in the class for activities they do in life, is a great thing for kids. Just make sure you excitedly 'discover' each student's identity. Ignore no one and keep things appropriate and equal.

A neat trick is to always add into the discussion that you also do that activity but that the student is of course *better at it than you*, and in fact they are *the best in the world at it*.

Establishing identities in class is one of the biggest keys to successful PQA. The personalization between you and the student naturally creates plenty of comprehensible input. Since the discussion is focused on the students' activities, students quickly develop a strong grasp of many verbs – the hearts of sentences.

It is no wonder that some of the most gifted TPRS teachers do little else than PQA. The trick in PQA is to flow with what you find out from the students and not to impose anything. You respond to what you learn as if it is the most interesting information you have ever heard. You get details while at the same time laughing and having fun.

That is all that PQA is – enjoying the kids and speaking the target language. The process is one of enjoyment – what has been called the 'game'. You focus on the student and you go slowly. Joe Neilson says,

I think that the essential three elements are: comprehension, interest and involvement, and meaningful repetition. As long as any activities have these elements, the students are learning.

Here is an example of how to use PQA to begin the school year. First, share something about yourself. Write on the board or overhead:

J'écris de la poésie – I write poetry

And then circle (see skill 5) the information:

Class, I write poetry! (Ohh!) Class, do I write poetry? (yes) Class, do I write poetry or do I write novels? (write 'romans – novels' on the board – they answer 'poetry') That's right, class, I write poetry! (Ohh!) Class, do I write novels? (no) That's right class, that's ridiculous, I don't write novels, I write poetry! (Ohh!)

Then they all draw a picture of what they do, with their name on the paper, easy for you to see as you stroll around the room. Then:

*Class, Casey plays volleyball!*

Then go to the board and write

Casey joue au volley – Casey plays volleyball

And then circle that:

Class, Casey plays volleyball! (Ohh!) Class, does Casey play volleyball? (yes) Class, does Casey play volleyball or does Casey write poetry? (volleyball) That's right, class, Casey plays volleyball! (Ohh!) Class, does Casey write novels? (no) That's right class, that's ridiculous, Casey doesn't write novels. She plays volleyball. (Ohh!)

These are your first days of class. You are talking about them. You are learning about them. Class is about them. You rarely leave the circling. You compare them to yourself. *They are always better than you.* They are the best in the world! You play volleyball, but Casey is number one, the best in the world. You compare them to each other. Each is the best at what they do.

You sign each expression, eyes closed, etc. first. Any new terms immediately go on the board the minute that they occur, with their translation. Three ring circuses (skill 8) appear and disappear. There is chanting. Getting to know your kids takes weeks.

Remember:

- to speak slowly.
- to circle each sentence, because it is necessary for your students that you do so.
- to point to the question words when you say them, and to pause when doing so.
- to point to the structures on the board when you use them, and to pause when you do so.
- to point to the new words you write down on the board *with their English translation.* Again, pause while you point.
- to clearly show that you are happy to be learning such wonderful things about such wonderful students.

What are you accomplishing? You are getting personalization and comprehensible input. You are getting interesting, repetitive input. Everything else is too complicated for the kids at the beginning of your time together. If it's not about them, it's too complicated.

When you talk about Casey, go slowly! Go ever so slowly! Stay on the questions about Casey with every intention to talk about Casey until the end of class. Convince the students that the fact that Casey plays volleyball is to you incredible and precious information.

PQA is by far the best way to personalize the class. Ask stories later, when they trust you completely to always be interested in them:

Class, does Casey play volleyball at home or at the post office? (Circle that – locations are drawn and labeled all over the room). Class, does Casey play volleyball well? (Circle it) Yes, class, she is the best!

PQA contains infinite possibilities. The reader is referred to the book *PQA in a Wink!* for a much more detailed discussion of this skill.

**Skill #2:** To what extent do you use PQA? Your comments on how this works for you:

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### **Skill #3: Extending PQA**

It is very easy to spin PQA into something bigger, to build a little scene or story. Often, it occurs without any effort at all as a natural outgrowth of PQA. These extensions of PQA can occur while the students remain in their seats or, if they have enough steam, they can turn into stories and take you right into Step Two of TPRS.

I always have in mind when I am extending PQA that I am not only trying to get to know the kids better while getting repetitions of the words for the day – I am also attempting to drive the CI all the way into a potential story.

Extended PQA differs from PQA in that it is less purely conversational, and so involves less first person practice. It can directly follow the teaching of the words at the beginning of class, or it can piggyback off either signing and gesturing or PQA.

Once I was talking to Thomas about his interest in trains. It turned out his dad has a basement world of trains. I registered the appropriate fascination with that fact. The PQA became extended PQA when I asked Thomas to stand next to me in class, I put

my hand on his shoulder, pointing into the distance, and asked him if he saw the train there, approaching us.

That extended PQA never became a story, although it had the potential, because Thomas and I got into an extended conversation about whether there was in fact a train coming towards us, since all he saw in front of him was a classroom wall.

Did I spin a marvelous story with Thomas? No. Did I deliver a large amount of comprehensible input during this period of arguing whether was a train or not? Yes. I remembered one of the most important things to remember in TPRS, that the story matters less than interesting and personalized comprehensible input.

In one class the structure was *a souri/smiled*. It was a two hour class with adult learners, and for 45 to 50 minutes, we simply talked about who was smiling that day in class. We added some imaginary people into the room and tried to figure out if they were smiling a lot, a little, sadly, joyfully, through tears, etc.

An imaginary dog in front of the class, the subject of some extended PQA, unexpectedly morphed into the hero of a story. During the extended PQA, the dog had become a member of our class, and so it was natural that he be included in the story! How that dog went from not existing to becoming a hero in our class is described in Sample Story A of this text.

It is clear that extending PQA into imaginary realms requires a certain mental adjustment on the part of the instructor. For most teachers, it is strange to take a few words and construct little scenes or images with them, but this is exactly what building extending PQA requires.

Once you first create a little scene out of the words available, it becomes addictive. Everybody wants to know where such scenes are going. Teachers are encouraged to learn to give themselves over to creating instant scenes out of nothing with just a few words.

When the class gets very interested because there is an extremely small red house on the floor just in front of you, don't abandon that! Talk about it until the energy dissipates, or becomes a story.

Think of extending PQA as building a kind of theatrical improvisation with the target structures. This may involve one or more than one student. Often the best extended PQA is completely imaginary.

Children do this all the time. They call it playing. Tapping into your ability to play will help you in TPRS. If you have forgotten how, try to remember. Just letting yourself go in the classroom and having fun with the kids is at the heart of TPRS.

While you are establishing meaning, doing PQA, and extending the PQA, remember to go slowly. Try to speak in slow chunks while you build images for the class. Skill 6 on going slowly will help you with this.

Just continue to ask detailed questions. ‘Milk’ as much information as possible from the students while they remain seated. Just say things about the students:

Thomas, is that a train coming towards us?  
Class, is Amber smiling?

And build on what you say. Such discussion naturally draws the attention of the people in the room, because it is about them and it is understandable. It is understandable because you are going slowly and writing down and translating in written form any new expressions that enter into the discussion. Who cares if what you are saying is factual or not, as long as CI is occurring? James may not be smiling when you say the following, but he likes the attention:

Class, James is smiling!

Remember to insist on a reaction (Ohh!) from the class (skill 11) before you circle the sentence.

Class, on Tuesday, James smiled 350 times! (Ohh! and you circle that)  
But on *Monday*, he smiled only three times! (Ohh! – circle) Class, James prefers (write and point to and pause – skill 4 – if this is a new expression) to smile a lot on Tuesdays! (Ohh! circle)

This is personalized comprehensible input. Later, when asking a story, instead of using the character provided in the scripted story, you make James or *someone in the room* into the hero of the story. James is much more interesting than any fictitious character from the scripted story. Good stories often find their roots in good extended PQA.

Stories that evolve from extended PQA may not develop according to your general idea of the scripted story line that you brought into class, but, because they are about *someone in the room*, they succeed. Blaine Ray does this all the time.

I once saw Blaine start a class in seemingly innocuous conversation in English with the tailback of the football team at East High School in Denver. He was really gathering personalized information – PQA. Quickly, the conversation turned into a scenario involving this athlete’s performance in the last game – extended PQA.

Soon, the athlete was standing up and in dialogue with another student in the class about events involving football – a story had formed in just a few minutes from nothing. This is truly what is meant by personalization. The football player’s personal interests and those of many students in the classroom had evolved into the subject of a story.

You know you have gained mastery of this process when you actually sneak from PQA through extended PQA and on into a story like Blaine did above, imperceptibly via CI and personalization. The students tend not to notice any transition points because they are focused on the CI and the personalization.

Just think of yourself as the engineer of a train. You first teach the words, warming up the engine of the train. After you teach the words, you have choices as to where you stop the train. Your train could stop locally at any combination of Signing/Gesturing City, PQA City, or Extended PQA City, *all part of Step One*. Or, you could decide that your train is an express train, *going directly to Step Two* and the story, rolling right past all three of those towns. The choice is always yours. Since comprehensible input occurs in all four places, it really doesn't matter where you stop.

**Skill #3:** Is extended PQA part of your day? Your comments on how this works for you:

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#### **Skill #4: Point and Pause!**

When you write your target language words or structures on the board or the overhead at any point in class, write the translation of the word in English as well. Then, during class, point to the structures and question words *each time you say them*. Do this *slowly*.

Point, as well, to the question words whenever you use them. They should already be translated and on the wall in poster form. Do not assume that your students know the question words. Point to them when you say them and wait for a few seconds, looking at your students, before going on.

Again, *write any new word down with its English translation and, pointing to both, pause* in order to let the new information sink in. Even after you have established meaning and begun the story, continue at all times to reinforce meaning by pointing and pausing during PQA and beyond.

Pointing to and pausing at the question words as well as the target structures and any new vocabulary throughout the lesson results in *much more highly engaged students*. The students really need you to do that so they don't get lost. Overlooking this skill may explain why teachers sometimes feel that TPRS doesn't work for them.

When you pause, count to four or five, or until you feel a kind of invisible “kathunk!” as the words fall into the minds of your students. Remember, this is all new information to the students. So wait for that “kathunk” moment to happen, even if it takes up to ten seconds!

If you sense that the word did not stick in their minds, *do not go on*. Instead, stay on the word until you sense that they “have” it. Do this for anything new or anything unfamiliar at any point in the class.

The pause time is vastly superior to talking non-stop. The kids need time to absorb and process the new information. Pausing (and twin sister SLOW) helps assure that our pointing has its desired effect.

It is our choice. We can point, pausing with the intention to make sure they get it, or we can point without pausing and *assume* they get it. If we do the latter, they probably won’t get it.

It takes months before the entire class truly locks on to the question words, and since the question words are always used in a TPRS class, are they not worth hammering in visually as well as auditorially?

In a recent community college class of motivated adults who were all in close physical proximity to me, I saw how valuable pointing really is. It was the first class of the term, and I literally pointed to *everything I said*.

Everything was on the white board, with English translations that were easy to see – all the question words, the two structures I was trying to teach, and a growing list of new words as they occurred in class.

I happened to be focusing on *just this one skill* in that class, hence I became firmly aware of its importance. I believe that had I not pointed to everything in that class, the students would not have been as engaged as they were. I am sold on the importance of this skill.

Be clear – we must *physically point to the structure and its English version on the board or overhead* each time that it is mentioned, remembering to pause. This is *especially true with the question words you use*, particularly at the beginning of the year.

The question words are:

que veut dire \_\_\_ – *what does \_\_\_ mean*  
qui – *who*  
que – *what*  
est-ce que – *is it that*  
qu’est-ce que – *what is it that*

est-ce qu'il y a, y a-t-il – *is there*  
de quelle couleur est – *what color is*  
où – *where*  
quand – *when*  
combien – *how much, how many*  
pourquoi – *why*  
parce que – *because*  
comment – *how, describe*  
quel/quelle – *which*  
de quelle couleur est – *what color is*  
à qui (ownership) – *whose*  
de qui (relationship) – *whose*

I once heard someone say at a workshop: “They get a lot less than we think.” That sentence has stuck with me, and I feel that pointing but doing so *in a way that we know they get it* is the best way to guarantee that our students get a lot MORE than we think.

Needless to say, we never introduce a new word or expression without first making sure that the previous one has been circled into comprehension. Two planes can't take off on the same runway at the same time. This fact is obvious intellectually, but, in the heat of teaching, it is not so easy to remember. More than a few TPRS teachers have become untracked by using words without first making sure that those words had been acquired via sufficient repetitions.

Thus, point to everything you can: the structures for the story, the question words, and any new words! Make sure they get it! Doing this guarantees happy students.

**Skill #4:** Are you pointing and pausing to the words as you say them? Your comments on how this works for you:

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### **Skill #5: Circling**

In the same almost magical way that pausing and pointing properly creates more engaged students, the students become strongly engaged when you circle properly. There is always a strong link between student engagement and good circling. In the early stages of learning this skill, you will probably refer frequently to your circling poster.

Circling is:

Statement  
Question  
Either/or  
Negative  
3 for 1  
What  
Who  
When  
Where  
Why  
Ask a detail

Here is an example of circling:

**Statement:** "Class, there is a boy." (ohh!)  
**Question:** "Class, is there a boy?" (yes)  
[**You add:** That's correct, class, there is a boy."]  
**Either/Or:** "Class, is there a boy or a girl?" (boy)  
[**You add:** That's correct, class, there is a boy."]  
**Negative:** "Is there a girl?" (no)  
[**You add:** That's correct, class, there is not a girl. There is a boy.]  
**3/1:** "Is there a monkey? (no)  
[**You add:** That's correct, class, there is not a monkey. There is a boy."]  
**What:** "Class, what is there?" (boy)  
[**You add:** That's correct, class, there is a boy."]  
**Who:** Class, what is the boy's name? (Howard Ino)  
[**You add:** That's correct, class, the boy's name is Howard Ino."]

(When, Where, Why and other details are circled in only when relevant.)

All research indicates that output cannot occur without having first been preceded by massive amounts of comprehensible input (listening). Thus, listening (CI) should be the pre-eminent focus of all foreign language instruction. *Circling is the pre-eminent feature of CI.* The astounding results gained by TPRS students would be impossible without circling.

The focus of circling in each sentence is on the part of the sentence new to the students. If you are in touch with what your students have already learned, then, when you circle, you can stress *with an increase in sound in your voice* the part of the sentence that is new to them.

One thought must be in the forefront of the instructor's mind when circling: the word or structure that you want the students to know must be repeated, repeated, and repeated again, and vocally accentuated at the same time.

Some instructors focus more on the circling than on the structure, thinking that there must be a “right” way to circle. Circling is not a formula to be blindly followed! Rather, repetitive questioning that *accentuates and repeats* the structure to be learned is proper circling.

By focusing less on the circling itself as a formula and more on the structure being circled, the structure quickly becomes comprehensible to the students. It becomes instantly recognizable to the students when it occurs later. Just remember that mixing up the questions and thus avoiding patterned responses is required for success.

It is possible to get ten questions from one sentence *by circling all three parts of the sentence. If the structure is:*

avait l'intention de (intended to)

I ask a student to stand next to me in front of the classroom. I ask, "Class, did Zach intend to drink some water yesterday?" And then I circle that as below. I circle the subject, then the verb, then the object. Note that although there are twelve sentences below, the first in each group is the same so there are really only ten questions.

First, you circle the subject:

1. Class, did *Zach* intend to drink some water yesterday? [Yes] That's right, class, *Zach* intended to drink some water yesterday.
2. Did *Zach* or *Derek* intend to drink some water yesterday? [Zach] That's right, class, *Zach* intended to drink some water yesterday.
3. Did *Derek* intend to drink some water yesterday? [No] That's right, class, that's absurd. *Derek* did not intend to drink some water yesterday. *Zach* intended to drink some water yesterday.
4. Class, who intended to drink some water yesterday? [Zach] That's right, class, *Zach* intended to drink some water yesterday.

Next, you circle the verb:

1. Class, did Zach *intend to drink* some water yesterday? [Yes] That's right, class, Zach *intended to drink* some water yesterday.
2. Did Zach *intend to drink* or *eat* some water yesterday? [Drink] That's right, class, Zach *intended to drink* some water yesterday.
3. Did Zach *intend to eat* some water yesterday? [No] That's right, class, that's absurd. Zach *did not intend to eat* some water yesterday. He *intended to drink* some water yesterday.
4. Class, what did Zach *intend to do* yesterday? [Drink some water] That's right, class, Zach *intended to drink* some water yesterday.

And then the object:

1. Class, did Zach intend to drink *some water* yesterday? [Yes] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink *some water* yesterday.

2. Did Zach intend to drink *some water* or *some milk* yesterday? [Water] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink *some water* yesterday.
3. Did Zach intend to drink *some milk* yesterday? [No] That's right, class, that's absurd. Zach did not intend to drink *some milk* yesterday. He intended to drink *some water* yesterday.
4. Class, what did Zach intend to drink yesterday? [Water] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink *some water* yesterday.

*It is not intended that you do all ten possibilities above. Instead, pick and choose depending on the situation. This technique gets good personalization of the structures, the students get needed repetitions, and the story will definitely roll along more easily with you having done this. Stop the circling when the class shows confidence in what you are saying.*

Once the pattern is understood, you then have the option of mixing it up. This is a good way to make students process each question at a higher level, resulting in greater gains. You have mastered this aspect of the skill when you can circle at will in random order without glancing at the chart.

A word of caution, however. Too much random circling, though artful, can really confuse the students. It is the old trap that many teachers fall into with TPRS: they think that because *they* get it, that their students naturally do as well.

Circling need not be limited to normal classroom discussion (PQA and stories). TPR commands, including those in the Three Ring Circus described later in this text, can be circled as well. If you command Mark to "run," once Mark has done so the instructor can then ask the class:

*Class, did Mark run? (yes)*  
*Did Mark or Ryan run? (Mark)*  
*Did Ryan run? (no)*  
*Did Derek run? (no)*  
*Did Mark run or walk? (run)*  
*Did Mark walk? (not)*  
*Did Mark swim? (no)*  
*Class, who ran? (Mark)*

If Mark then "ran to the left," you can see how adding just this one simple detail greatly increases the number of questions you can ask. *Every time you add a detail to a discussion you greatly increase what you can do with circling.*

Circling TPR commands and sentences in the Three Ring Circus builds great confidence in teachers new to TPRS because they are so easy to do. See Skill 8 for more information on the Three Ring Circus.

I often repeat *the same exact question* three or four times in a row using different emotions. One would think that this would bore the kids, but the kids can be fooled into decoding the same sentence multiple times *by asking them questions in different ways using different emotions.*

*C'est vrai?/Is that true?* said in a timid way, for example, conveys a completely different meaning than the same expression said with anger, or with embarrassment, or with surprise. *The emotions override the meaning*, and the students *don't notice* that the words are the same. This keeps interest high in the structure, resulting in more meaningful repetitions and greater acquisition.

A multitude of studies support this trickery, stating that most of human communication is non-verbal. If these studies are accurate, it means that many language teachers plan their teaching around less than 10% of what is actually happening in the classroom!

If you want to prove the accuracy of this research, simply point to something in class while you are speaking, but do not connect what you are saying with what you are pointing at. All heads will turn and focus at what you are pointing at, and the kids will *completely tune out* your verbal message in favor of the (fake) visual message. The effective TPRS teacher will explore the role of the voice to convey meaning in their own classroom.

Another way to make input meaningful to the students using circling is to add a parallel sentence to the one you are already circling. A parallel sentence can be described as a sentence which has the same verbal core, but whose subject and object are different.

If you are trying to teach *voudrait avoir*/would like to have, instead of circling just one sentence around that expression, you introduce a similar sentence and circle both of them.

If your original sentence is:

*Classe, Elliot voudrait avoir une voiture* /Class, Elliot would like to have a car!

You add another, parallel, sentence into the circling:

*Classe, Jane voudrait avoir un Sprite* /Class, Jane would like to have a Sprite!

Adding this second sentence expands the size of the circling “field” in which you are working. It instantly adds many more possible questions to your circling, because you can do more with two sentences than you can with one. Adding a second, parallel sentence into your circling brings more repetitions, and whenever there are greater repetitions, there are greater levels of comprehensible input and learning.

I consider this technique of bringing in a second sentence to mirror another one during circling to be one of the truly great little tricks in TPRS – you will feel immediately more relaxed when you have that extra sentence to ask questions about.

Songs can be circled. Each line in a song can become a still picture, and you can ask the students what is in the picture. The students will surprise you with what they deem real and what is not real in the image you create together.

If the line (here by *Les Ogres*) is: *Il y a un mec sur un banc* (there is a guy on a bench), write any new words or structures on the board or the overhead. Put two chairs together, call it a bench. Put a boy on it, and start circling.

*Class, there is a guy on a bench. (ohh!)*  
*Is there a guy on a bench? (yes)*  
*Is there a guy on a bench or is there a guy on a suitcase? (bench)*  
*Is there a guy on a suitcase?(no)*  
*Is there a guy on a desk? (no)*  
*What is there on a bench? (a guy)*  
*Where is the guy? (bench)*  
*etc.*

The students have to believe and you have to create via the circling what amount to little scenes. Once a line has been circled enough so that you feel that the students have gotten enough repetitions of one line of a song, you create another scene for the next line. If the line is not conducive, skip it.

The riveting trio *Le Coeur au Bonheur* between Marius, Cosette, and Éponine in *Les Misérables* is slow and contains very simple yet emotionally charged structures. Hence, it is perfect for circling. Here is a passage:

Marius:

*Je ne sais même pas votre nom, chère mademoiselle/I don't even know your name dear miss.  
Je suis fou!/I am crazy! Qu'elle est belle!/How beautiful she is!*

Cosette:

*... dites-moi qui vous êtes/tell me who you are.*

Marius:

*Je m'appelle Marius Pontmercy/My name is Marius Pontmercy.*

Cosette:

*Et moi, Cosette/And I, Cosette*

Marius:

*Cosette, je ne trouve pas les mots/Cosette, I don't find the words.*

Cosette :

*Ne dites rien/Say nothing !*

Marius

*Mon coeur tremble/My heart is trembling.*

This passage has the capacity to grip the interest of even the most jaded students because it appeals to the emotions. Teenagers are pulled to words of love. They may cover it with laughter, but when class is about love, they are all ears.

When people *want to know* what words mean, they will learn them. Personalized discussion and stories are interesting, but songs like this are powerfully interesting. How can this passage be used?

First, write only the first line of the text on the board with its English translation, as you do whenever you start teaching with TPRS.

Je ne sais même pas votre nom/I don't even know your name.

Next, sign/gesture each word:

*Je/I* – they point to themselves

*Sais/know* – point to their minds

*Ne...pas/not* – hands crossing back and forth in front of them

*Votre/your* – point to a student who will later act the role of Cosette in a dialogue

*Nom/name* – write the name Cosette on the board and point to it.

Note that we are leaving the word *même/even* alone in the interests of simplicity. When the kids hear that word in later in the song, they will recognize it as a new sound and ask you what it means and acquire it in a few seconds. Why? Because this line of language *means something to them*.

Once the students can show that they know each word by itself, go to combinations of two, then three, eyes open, eyes closed, and just play this highly enjoyable game of trying to sign the words.

Then, before going to the next line, stand up a boy and a girl in the acting space and ask the boy to say the line to the girl. If the boy balks, get behind him and have him lip-synch it as you say it.

Next, ask the students to tell you what the words mean in English when you say them. Praise them for knowing them.

By working repetitively with only small parts of the sentence, the meaning of those pieces becomes firmly established in the minds of the students. Before long, it is time to circle the entire structure. So:

*Classe, je ne sais pas votre nom/Class, I don't know your name! (ohh!)*

*Classe, je sais votre nom ou je ne sais pas votre nom/Class! Do I know your name or do I not know your name? (ne sais pas/don't know)*

*Correcte, classe, je ne sais pas votre nom/Correct, class ! I don't know your name.*

*Classe, je sais votre nom?/Class, do I know your name? (no)*

*Classe, le professeur ne sait pas votre nom?/Class, doesn't the teacher know your name? (yes)*  
etc.

Relax when you circle. There is no right way to do it. All you want to do is get meaningful, comprehensible, repetitions of words. Go slowly enough, make plenty

of eye contact, and stay on the structure until you sense that the students are comfortable with it.

Ask the boy to repeat the line to the girl again, with feeling. This keeps the interest high. Nobody will be watching the clock to see how long it is before class ends when you do this.

Next, moving to the next line, write the new expression on the board with its translation:

*Chère mademoiselle*/Dear miss

then sign and gesture it

*Chère*/Dear – hands clasped together in front of heart

*Mademoiselle*/Miss – point to your Cosette.

Two important points:

1. remember to point and pause at the words in their written form on the board to reinforce everything going on
2. the kids suggest the signs, creating ownership

Then, as before, say each expression while they sign it. Once they show that they know the words “*chère*” and “*mademoiselle*”, combine the two, eyes open, eyes closed, and just play the game of signing the words.

Then, returning to the acting space, ask the boy to say the line to the girl, with feeling. If the boy balks, you have chosen the wrong actor, and you have to get behind the boy and lip-synch the words.

Again, ask the kids what the words mean in English after you say them. Praise them for knowing them. Take every opportunity to give them reason to be confident.

Then circle this set of words:

*Classe, chère mademoiselle?*/Class, dear miss? (yes)

*Classe, chère mademoiselle ou cher monsieur?*/Class, dear miss or dear sir? (*chère mademoiselle*)

*Classe, cher monsieur?*/Class, dear sir? (no)

*Correcte, classe, pas cher monsieur! Chère mademoiselle!*/Correct, class, not dear sir! dear miss!  
(yes)

*Classe, chère amie?*/Class, dear friend? (no)

etc.

So the process of circling a song is the same as circling anything else. The “must have” ingredients for successful circling are slow, personalized, comprehensible, repetitive language that is interesting and carries meaning. All those ingredients are present above.

To review the process of circling lines in a song:

1. Establish meaning by writing the words of the first line of the song with its English translation on the board.
2. Sign and gesture the words, one at a time.
3. Play the signing and gesturing game of combining words, eyes closed, etc.
4. Ask the actor to say the line to the other actor, lip synching if necessary.
5. Ask the kids what the terms mean in English, praising them when they easily do so.
6. Circle the words, remembering that all circling needs to be:

*meaningful* – the words of love between actors create high interest from the very first line,

*personalized* - these students are speaking words that mean something to each other in the context of the scene (and which they can and will take outside of class and say to their girl or boyfriends!)

*repetitive* (done via the six steps above)

*I don't inform my students that they are studying a song during this process.*

Withholding that information creates an interesting challenge for me, one that makes my own relationship with what I am teaching more interesting. Will I teach the words of the song well?

If I do, the moment when they first hear the song will be a fine one indeed. When kids can understand such a beautiful song in French in only their first year of study, a strong desire to learn the language is created in them. Isn't that our business?

Try to be open to when a song might fit into the story. Such moments are usually missed as the instructor focuses on the story. However, if the small man in the small boat suddenly sees French soil, you can digress for a few moments to circle the discussion in the direction of a song, this one from Barbara MacArthur's *Sing, Laugh, Dance, and Eat Quiche* CD:

*Class, the man sees France!*

*Class, does the man see France or attack France?*

*(circling continues, etc.)*

Then, because you know you have the following song on CD, you twist the story into:

*Class, the man sees the French flag!*

*(circling continues, etc.)*

*Class, what color is the flag?*

*That's right, class, it is blue, white, and red.*

*(circling continues, etc.)*

It helps to have simple songs that that you know by heart. This song lasts about a minute. When you have circled it, you play it and, of course, since you have a great voice, you sing loudly with it, perhaps throwing in a nice flat hand French salute in.

The kids love it, and you get to sing about a culture you love! Then, with a digression of maybe four or five minutes, back to the story you go.

Some teachers may object that it is just too hard to try to remember to do things like push stories toward songs. But the point about TPRS is that there is nothing to remember, that everything (songs, cute answers, laughter, all of the things that happen in a story) *emerges from the moments of circling* questions and listening for cute answers.

So, if you remember that you have a song on CD about the French flag during the story, include it, otherwise, don't worry, because something always emerges if you are not stifling the moment of creativity with some kind of plan.

Even lists of words at the beginning of the story are potential limiting agents for stories, as the teacher tries to always drive and connect the story to those words and perhaps a story script.