

TPRS: Contributions, controversies, problems, and new frontiers Stephen Krashen (July, 2015)*

CONTRIBUTIONS OF TPRS

These are the Blaine Ray innovations that have profoundly changed second language education.

Compelling comprehensible input

The history of second language teaching in the last 50 years has featured a steady increase in the amount of compelling comprehensible input provided in classes. Traditional methods contained very little comprehensible input, and were anything but compelling.

TPR was a major step forward: Comprehensibility was supported by body movements as context, and the messages were significantly more interesting than grammar explanations or the tepid texts in traditional texts.

Natural Approach did even better. It included TPR but also games, activities and stories, activities that were more interesting than traditional "conversation class" activities.

TPRS maintains the innovations of the methods that went before it, but represents a big increase in interesting input. This is done in two related ways: (1) A major emphasis on stories, co-created by the student and teacher. Everybody in every culture is interested in stories. (2) Personalization. In TPRS, the stories and other class activities are about the people the students care about the most: themselves. (See especially chapter 15 in Ray and Seely, 2015, largely the work of Karen Rowan.)

Pop-up grammar

Consciously learned grammar has these functions: (1) as a Monitor (2) to make input more comprehensible (3) for language appreciation. In my view, pop-up grammar can provide information for each of these functions, but is not a full grammar lesson; it is a brief explanation of a grammatical rule or vocabulary item that generally takes only a few seconds and that can be done in the first language, especially in beginning levels (Ray and Seely, 2015, p. 61). Students are free to "take it or leave it." Pop-ups might be very satisfying to the few junior linguists in high school foreign language classes.

Michele Whaley (comment on moreTPRS listserv) has pointed out that sometimes we need to appeal to consciously learned language to solve real-world problems, when we need to say something beyond our current competence. Agreed. Sometimes it's important to learn to say something correctly, and you can't wait for acquisition. I do this also. The learning may not last very long, but it solves the real-world problem.

Reading

TPRS is the only foreign language teaching method in the US that has taken pleasure reading seriously. TPRS authors have created booklets that attempt to provide stories that are comprehensible and, if not compelling, at least interesting for high school students. My hope is that there will soon be thousands of "easy readers" available, as is already the case with graded readers for students of English, enough for self-selection for reading during sustained silent reading and outside of class. Student-created stories placed on the internet might fill this gap quickly (see "The potential of technology" section below).

PROBLEMS

The urge for transparency

Input is transparent if the acquirer understands every word. This is, of course, a crude definition. We could define extreme transparency as a conscious understanding of not only every word but every grammatical marker and morpheme.

Transparent is not the same as "comprehensible." If input is transparent, it is comprehensible, but input can be comprehensible and not fully transparent, that is, it could contain some as yet unacquired language that does not interfere with comprehension ("noise").

A few students insist on transparency. These may be students with a deep interest in grammar or students with a need for "certainty" who do not fully trust natural acquisition (or are not aware of it). There are several solutions for this and I think we should take advantage of both:

- (1) include some grammar, as popup grammar. (Note 1)
- (2) Share at least some aspects of the theory with the students, so they realize that transparency is not necessary for language acquisition.
- (3) Make the input as compelling as possible. An exciting hypothesis: The more compelling the input, the more tolerant the acquirer is of "noise" in the input. In fact, the acquirer may not even notice the noise, the pockets of incomprehensible input: The input will appear to be fully transparent. Our goal is thus the illusion of transparency. (NOTE 1)

Note 1: In addition to popup grammar, we can satisfy some of the craving for details of grammar that some students have by recommending a clearly written grammar book for self-study. This conscious knowledge might be available for monitoring, might occasionally make input more comprehensible, and might satisfy curiosity, but it will not lead to the acquisition of consciously learned structures, even if "practiced" in output. "Learning" does not become "acquisition" (Krashen, 1982; 1985).

Note 2: "Classic" TPRS ensured transparency by insisting on translation. It has been argued that simply relying on context is dangerous because students might get the wrong meaning-

The same concern has come up in reading theory: how do we know that readers are arriving at the correct meaning of an unfamiliar word – some contexts are "deceptive" or "misleading." But: (1) most contexts are not deceptive. Beck, McKeown and McClaslin, (1983) examined contexts in basal readings: 61% providing at least some clues to the meanings of unfamiliar words, 31% were of no help, and only 8% were "misdirective." (2) We don't expect full acquisition of a meaning of a word from one exposure; rather, meaning is built up gradually, a little at a time, as we encounter the word again and again in comprehensible contexts (see results of "read and test" studies discussed in Krashen, 2004, and discussion in Krashen, 2013a.). (3) Acquiring vocabulary from context is the way we have acquired nearly all of our vocabulary. When we consider the thousands of words we know, in L1 or L2, very few were defined or translated for us.

Targeted grammar and vocabulary

The problems with having a "rule of the day":

1. It generally violates the natural order. This means that the rule may not be acquired, despite compelling comprehensible input.
2. It constrains interest. It is very hard to create compelling messages when the real agenda is a grammatical rule or pre-selected target vocabulary. In fact, it is hard enough to do it this when there are no constraints on what vocabulary and grammar can be used.
3. Consciously learned grammar generally needs to be reviewed. After the initial presentation, a grammar rule presented in class and in the text may not be seen again for quite a while, so reviews must be scheduled.
4. Much of grammar is unteachable and untaught. The texts and syllabi do not include all the known rules, and new rules are being discovered constantly.
5. Denial of i+1: The impoverished input provided by the traditional grammatical syllabus will result in students not getting input in structures they actually are ready for. (Even when there is a focus on a target rule, TPRS usually makes the input linguistically much richer and includes language other than the target rule, however.)

Nontargeted comprehensible input solves these problems effortlessly:

The important hypothesis is that comprehensible input, if we supply enough of it, contains and naturally reviews i+1, and covers grammar rules that will not be in the syllabus, as well as those that linguists have not yet discovered. There is thus no need to repeat and repeat until rules are "mastered." CI provides natural review and the rule will be acquired when "its time as come."

If we simply focus on providing compelling input, our task is much easier and class is more interesting for both us and our students.

The obvious reason we cannot simply drop targeting is that our institutions demand it. Many teachers work in schools and districts that require that certain grammatical structures be covered, and often in a certain order that conflicts with the natural order.

We can deal with this in several ways. The most obvious is what we are doing already: sharing our results and conclusions as widely as possible. There is also research to be

done to make our case even better: We need to determine what structures are naturally acquired when students receive "pure" comprehensible input, without targeting. I predict that many of the structures that teachers are required to teach will already be acquired. Of course, the late-acquired structures will not be acquired after only one year, or even two years, but this reduces the need for targeting enormously. Our only task then is to deal with late-acquired structures: some, at least, can be taught directly, and this knowledge will be available on form-based tests. I understand that these tasks are the responsibility of researchers. Teachers already have too much to do.

Writing and Timed Writing

I understand the arguments for using timed writing as a measure of fluency. It is highly likely that timed writing, the number of words students can write in a given amount of time, is indeed a valid measure of proficiency: those who have more competence will generally be able to write more.

The problem is "washback," the potential impact of tests on instruction (Jones, 1979): If teachers and students know that they will be tested using timed writing, there is the temptation to practice timed writing. But this kind of output practice, according to theory, will not result in more fluency – fluency is the result of competence, which comes from receiving massive amounts of comprehensible input. (Note 3, Note 4).

Note 3: Judith Logsdon-Dubois (post on moreTPRS listserv) has observed that among students who have had a great deal of traditional instruction and who have "acquired very little other than a sense of failure," timed writing is a good way of letting them experience how much they have acquired. It helps them recover from traditional language teaching "by letting the monitor step aside" and lowering the "output filter," resulting in increased confidence. This could result in more interaction, and thus more comprehensible input.

The question remains: Should we still use timed writing as a test? Or use it occasionally as therapy, as a confidence-building activity?

Note 4: I tried to make the same point about DIBELS testing. DIBELS tests ask children to read nonsense words as quickly as they can. Scores on DIBELS tests are valid measures of reading ability, but they encourage the wrong kind of preparation:

Education Week, Published Oct 15, 2005. Reading Experts Question Efficacy of DIBELS Test

Your front-page story ("National Clout of DIBELS Test Draws Scrutiny," Sept. 28, 2005) gives the impression that the argument is whether the right reading test to give young children is the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills or some other skills assessment, such as the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening tests. Missing, except for a brief quote from P. David Pearson, is a discussion of what I think is the real problem.

If reading researchers Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman are right, and I think they are, the "skills" children need to pass DIBELS and similar tests are the result of reading. The use of DIBELS and its cousins encourages test preparation in the form of skills training, which is a confusion of cause and effect.

In other words, practicing reading nonsense words quickly, in preparation for the DIBELS test,

will not contribute very much to helping children learn to read. But the experience of reading comprehensible and interesting texts will result in the ability to read, as well as develop the capacity to read nonsense words quickly. Good readers can easily read the boxed list of nonsense words presented with the story, whether they have had extensive skills training or not.

The correlation between DIBELS scores and subsequent reading-test performance is spurious. Both are the result of the experience of real reading.

Stephen Krashen

Should we practice writing at all?

It has been argued that while writing itself does not cause language acquisition (research summarized in Krashen, 1994, 2004), writing can have a profound impact on thinking and problem-solving: In fact, writing can make us smarter (Krashen, 2014a). As we move from draft to draft, as we revise, we come up with new ideas.

This certainly can happen with beginning foreign language students, but there are obvious limitations because of limited competence. I would not advise avoiding writing, but I do not think we should require it. I would not have students "practice" writing in order to improve their writing, or in order to improve any other aspect of language competence. The only real "practice" that counts is comprehensible input. (See discussion of the possible benefits of blogging for intermediate students in the "technology" section below.)

Output

A persistent rumor since the 1970's is that comprehension-based language teaching forbids student speaking. This has never been true. Comprehension-based classes warmly encourage student speaking, but do not force output, and never require students to speak using aspects of language they have not yet acquired.

Speaking can help acquisition, but it helps indirectly: When you speak, somebody might answer – this is conversation, and conversation provides input for language acquisition. Thus, the value of conversation is what the other person says to you, not what you say to them (Note 5).

NOTE 5: The Comprehensible Output Hypothesis maintains that your own output helps acquisition. We try to transmit a message but fail and have to try again. Eventually, we arrive at the correct form of our utterance, our conversational partner finally understands, and as a result we acquire the new form we have produced. I have argued against this hypothesis (Krashen, 1988), pointing out that such instances in real conversation are rare, and that acquisition can take place without any production at all.

What about cases in which second language acquirers do not seem to emerge from their silent period? This seems to happen to some second-generation "heritage language" speakers, who are reluctant to speak the home language and sometimes even claim they can understand it, but can't speak it.

My analysis (Krashen, 1998) is that second generation speakers of heritage languages

often speak the heritage language quite well, but lack late-acquired aspects of the language because of insufficient input. These markers do not contribute to communication but may mark the speaker as a member of a certain social class.

Fully competent heritage language speakers often respond to these "errors" with correction and even ridicule, responses that can be devastating to the less proficient speakers. Error correction and criticism do not help, and can have the opposite effect: Rather than risk error, these less proficient speakers avoid the use of the heritage language and get even less interaction and comprehensible input.

Circling: Are we just doing ALM (audio-lingual method)?

Yes, at its worst. This happens when (1) there is a targeted structure; (2) the questions are obviously intended just to supply more exposure; (3) students are expected to produce beyond their competence. But circling done when there is no targeted structure, when the questions are truly interesting, and "forced speech" is not demanded, is a powerful means of providing comprehensible input. When it is done right, students are not aware it is happening, and focus only on the message.

The first TPRS classes I attended, taught by Jason Fritze and Linda Li, included lots of circling, but I wasn't aware of it, because the stories they were creating (and asking) were so interesting.

Jason Fritze noted in one of his presentations in Turkey (2015) that the essence of TPRS is not circling. The essence is compelling stories. Circling is a device for confirming comprehension and pushing the story along.

NEW FRONTIERS

Subject matter teachers are highly constrained by set syllabi. Foreign language teachers are not. We can use any subject matter we want to, as long as it supplies compelling comprehensible input. Here are some possibilities.

Expanding TPR

We all agree that TPR was one of the great breakthroughs in the history of language education. I think there is even more we can do with it, especially if we are not limited by having to work on target structures.

The core idea of TPR is the use of movement to make input comprehensible and engage students. But we don't have to limit ourselves to "stand up," "if John is wearing a hat, clap two times," etc..

I suggest we consider:

1. Exercises, especially yoga instruction.
2. Simple self-defense techniques: this can be extremely compelling, eg defending

yourself against a chokehold.
These two will cover lots of body parts with lots of natural repetition.

3. Simple magic tricks
4. Cooking
5. Teaching juggling. (Note: I learned to juggle three balls with two hands and two with one hand in college. A fellow student in the dorms saw the movie "The Juggler" and decided that if Kirk Douglas could learn to juggle, so could he. He learned how to do it and taught all his pals in the dorm, including me. It takes a little practice to do three balls, but it isn't that hard.)

Sheltered subject matter teaching

A variety of topics promise to be compelling for students beyond the beginning level. In addition to continuing TPR Storytelling, the following give an idea of what is possible:

Music: This can include basic performance (students learn to play either the ukelele or the recorder (wooden flute) and learn some music theory), music appreciation with a focus on interesting personalities (Somebody asked John Lennon if Ringo Starr was the best drummer in the world? What was his answer? See:

<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/dec/02/entertainment/la-et-ms-beatles-ringo-starr-biography-tune-in-mark-lewisohn-20131202>).

Popular literature: Reading and discussion of easy authentic novels and magazines currently popular in countries where the language is spoken, with an emphasis on insights into the culture as well as the universal human (and teenager) condition. A major goal is to stimulate interest in independent reading among our students.

Second language acquisition research and theory. (Some of the readings can be in English, with class discussion in the target language.) I hope that some theory and research will be included for all students, but an optional unit can be provided for those who want to go deeper. Quite a few of the professional papers in our field are comprehensible for intermediate second language acquirers. The goal is not to convince students that our way is the only way, but that there is an alternative to traditional skill-building. Knowing more about the theory underlying our approach will also help students understand why we do what we do in class and will help them continue to improve after they finish their foreign language classes.

Linguistics: For the few who are genuinely interested in linguistics, an introduction to syntax, phonology, language change, dialects, etc.

Our sheltered classes can put students on the path to advanced levels of language acquisition, especially if help students establish a pleasure reading habit, narrow reading in a topic of interest or a genre of interest (Krashen, 2000).

Of course, these courses or modules will only work if teachers are excited about and able

to teach them. And not every student will be interested in every topic. Ideal would be a system in which teachers teach their favorite topics with groups of students who have a special interest in that topic.

ISSUES

What do we do when students have different first languages?

This question will soon be a very important one, as TPRS is already spreading to other countries and other languages, and might influence ESL in the United States. The issue is relevant because "traditional" TPRS required extensive use of translation, which will not be possible when students speak different first languages. Ray and Seely (2015, p. 19), while maintaining the primacy of translation in TPRS, note, however, that use of the first language is only one way to make input comprehensible.

Using the first language is especially valuable when teaching a language that has few or no cognates with the students' first language (Note 6) and for providing background information, but there are other ways to make input comprehensible: e.g. visual context, in the form of pictures (Tracy Terrell had a vast collection of pictures, many donated by students), films, real objects, movements of the body (TPR), and linguistic context, in form of explanations, descriptions, and synonyms in the second language.

NOTE 6: My only encounter with a second language with no cognates was a TPRS class I took from Linda Li. I had been exposed to a great deal of Mandarin from trips to Taiwan, but had acquired nothing: All input I heard had been incomprehensible. But Linda's class was very comprehensible. Providing translations, and posting them, as recommended by Blaine Ray, was a huge help. It wasn't however, the only way input was made comprehensible in this class.

Of course, providing translation will ensure transparency down to the level of the individual word, but this is not necessary for comprehension and acquisition, even though it is reassuring for some students. For vocabulary acquisition, for example, we do not acquire the full meaning of words all at once: as we encounter new words in a comprehensible context, we gradually acquire their meanings a little at a time: It has been estimated that each time we encounter a new word, we pick up about 5 to 10% of the meaning. Given enough comprehensible input, this is more than enough (see Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985; other citations in Note 2).

The potential of technology

We have not exploited the most obvious and inexpensive uses of technology in language education, but are instead encouraged to spend substantial amounts of money using ineffective or uninvestigated commercial programs.

I suggest we first exploit technology to provide comprehensible input, and the easiest first step is written texts. Technology can help close the largest gap we have in the foreign language teaching profession: interesting and comprehensible texts for beginners and

intermediates in languages other than English. As mentioned earlier, in my opinion TPRS publishers have done a magnificent job in providing short and interesting novels in various foreign languages, but we need hundreds or even thousands more so that students have a wide selection for doing substantial amounts of self-selected reading. Technology can solve this problem in just a few weeks: I suggest we set up blogs with TPRS stories from classes around the world, to be shared with classes everywhere (Rowan, in Ray and Seely, 2015, p . 265, discusses the idea of sharing stories).

ELSPod.com provides a good example of how technology can help intermediates, supplying interesting texts in a wide variety of subjects in English.

There are plenty of audio and video recordings in other languages easily available on the internet, but nearly all are for native speakers, well beyond our beginning and even intermediate students, and nearly all that are comprehensible are pedagogical, with little or no evidence that they work (NOTE 7). Why not create comprehensible stories for second language acquirers? Anyone with just a little computer knowledge can create these and post them for free. TPRS classes produce many stories that can be shared. (An early product, *Destinos*, a detective story in comprehensible Spanish, is still available, but Amazon lists it for \$160 new and \$65 used.)

NOTE 7: I have reviewed two commercial software programs for beginning foreign language education: Rosetta Stone (Krashen, 2013b) and Duolingo (Krashen, 2014b) and conclude that they do not live up to their advertised promises. I reached similar conclusions after a review of software on pronunciation improvement (Krashen, 2013c).

Jarvis and Achilleos (2013) provide evidence that international students studying in the UK do not find websites dedicated to teaching English as valuable as using the internet for "other things": only 29% of their sample said they found "web pages designed for English language learning" helpful for English language development. In contrast, 71% said they found "other things but using English" to be helpful, such as "accessing information, communication with friends/family, listening to music, etc." These students, however, may have been fairly advanced in English (Jarvis and Krashen, 2014).

TPRS has taken advantage of technology by adopting Movie Talk: The idea, developed by Ashley Hastings, is simple – play the visual of a real movie and the instructor supplies the narration, discussion, description and dialog in a way that is interesting and comprehensible to the students (see <http://glesismore.com/movietalk/preview.html>).

Another unexploited use of technology is simple blogging. Lee (2015), in a study of students of English as a Foreign Language at a university in Taiwan, provides data suggesting that blogging reactions to what is read, as well as observations about the reading process, when shared with others, may help build a reading culture (a "literacy club"), and may encourage the establishment of a reading habit among intermediate level students.

The internet also supplies us with inexpensive, often free, access to knowledge about our field. We are no longer completely dependent on expensive books and journals. There are now free ("open access") sources of information, such as websites created by

experienced practitioners about language teaching practice, and journals, including one that is dedicated to TPRS and other comprehension-based approaches: IJFLT, The International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching (available at ijflt.com).

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