

PQA in a Wink!

How to Succeed with TPRS
by Personalizing the Classroom

by

Ben Slavic

“It’s not that I didn’t understand TPRS....
I just didn’t understand personalization!”

- Jennifer Wilczewski
Denver, CO

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“I had the privilege of a sneak peek at Ben Slavic's new, soon-to-be published book, *PQA in a Wink!*

“I think it is what we new, inexperienced and struggling teachers have been waiting for. Many of you have seen Ben's posts over the past few months about personalizing and building rapport with the students. This book is the full version, spelled out clearly (for those of us who are on overload!).

“What I took away from it is that while the theory and method of TPRS are important, making connections with the students is the key, and Ben shows you how to do it. Many people have tried to explain it on the list, and have done so beautifully; however, this in-depth explanation finally reached me. It provides a framework to help make PQA work.

“Ben, I'm sure you will let us know when it is available. Thank you for this wonderful and inspiring guide.”

Fern Weis
Pequannock Valley School
Pompton Plains, NJ

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Author's Note

Over the past six years, my efforts to learn Blaine Ray's TPRStorytelling® (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Stories) would not have come to fruition without the strong guiding hand of Susan Gross, to whom I owe a level of gratitude beyond words.

Susie's knowledge of TPRS is in my view unsurpassed. Yet, I believe that it was really the sincere *personal* interest that Susie showed in my development as a teacher that turned the key. She really wanted to give me the tools that I needed in order to communicate in a better way with my students in French. Susie showed me by example that the personal interest we show in our students is at least as important as our knowledge of the language we are representing in the classroom.

In foreign languages we sometimes look too closely at and puzzle over technique when, if we were but to focus to a greater extent *on the kids themselves*, we would see gains in communication in the target language we could not have predicted.

It is in this spirit of personalizing the classroom around the TPRS skill of Personalized Questions and Answers, or PQA, that I wrote this book. I would argue that PQA is *the* essential skill in TPRS and the ticket to achieving success in any foreign language classroom.

PQA in a Wink! provides both TPRS teachers and non-TPRS teachers with only one interpretation of PQA, my own. No claim is made to represent PQA as practiced by other TPRS teachers.

The personalization activities in this book are simple to do. Moreover, PQA as described in the following pages can be easily blended into any curriculum, even a non-TPRS curriculum.

Readers are invited to experiment with the activities presented in this book, and then choose the ones they wish to integrate into their own teaching. There is no "right way" to

do them. Practicing these activities will definitely increase your ease of communication students and bring a sense of play and fun into your classrooms. Keep reading to unlock *a great way to reach kids* in the foreign language classroom!

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Introduction

In 2005, a ninth grade TPRS student, taking AP French although only in French II, discovered an error on the listening portion of the National French Exam. The AATF leaders, although agreeing that he was correct, not only refused to change his score but also *refused to believe* that a second year student could be taking an AP language class (the student's score that year was a 4).

Every single university professor contacted in the AATF hierarchy about this situation expressed the same reaction: *it didn't make sense* to them that a second year student would be taking an AP class.

It is true that this student was extraordinarily gifted and truly motivated, but it is also true that strong AP language scores from TPRS students at all levels of study are happening more frequently now on a national level. TPRS students are showing much higher gains than non-TPRS students. For those to whom such results *do make sense*, TPRS is becoming a method with great potential.

However, TPRS requires radical change from teachers. Jumping into the method has just seemed too precipitous for many teachers. Is there a way to start slowly and just use *some* of TPRS in the classroom? What is a good starting point?

James Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) method has been one such starting point, but most teachers find it difficult to use TPR for long. TPR gets boring quickly! And students resist the repetitive commands after just a few minutes of class. Why is this?

Among several answers, one stands out: TPR is not really about *the students*. Susan Gross has repeatedly stated that TPRS should be *about the students*. We are beginning to see that success in our classroom depends to a much greater extent than we once thought on the degree to which we personalize our classrooms.

At the time of this writing (2007), the professional responsibilities of foreign language educators in the form of district benchmarks and standards are increasingly based on the acquisition of oral/aural skills. Since communication is essentially interpersonal, reciprocal, and participatory, we have no choice but to take an honest look at what personalizing our classrooms means in the new foreign language classroom.

Teachers are often unaware that in beginning classrooms there is a complex web of dynamic interpersonal relationships going on in the room. Patterns are being formed

which will last all year. Certain students try day after day to impress others, vying with each other and with the teacher for attention, etc. *This undercurrent of invisible yet very powerful energy in the class must be directed somewhere if the class is to be successful.*

About four to six weeks into the year, most students in a traditional foreign language class begin to see that the course of study is not going to be devoted to actually acquiring the language, but to discussion about how the language is built. They also begin to see that the course of study is not going to be centered around them, which in teenagers counts for a lot. These two factors cause an unexpressed resentment in many students. Apathy grows.

In response to student apathy and discontent, some teachers clamp down on the class in the interest of professional survival, and what might have been a joyful and fun activity, learning a language, becomes drudgery. All but the high academic achievers retreat into themselves. The smiles and enthusiasm of the first few weeks of school disappear. Significant drops in enrollment occur at each level of advancement.

Students want to know how to *understand and speak* a foreign language, not how it is grammatically built. They want to know how the language can apply to their lives, and not the opposite. Instead of focusing merely on curriculum, we must shift our focus to include the agenda that *the students* bring to learning – themselves.

Students must finally be invited to learn what it means to authentically participate in a foreign language class. A teacher has no greater duty than to give the young people in his or her classes a chance to get interested in life, to feel important and valued, and to feel engaged and successful their learning.

The personalization suggestions made in *PQA in a Wink!* are easy to implement in the classroom. They are clear and detailed. They are like scaffolding on a building, easily removed once the building is constructed. The gains are clear and measurable.

Diane Grieman on the TPRS listserv (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/moretprs>) has described PQA in a nutshell. Here is what she says:

“After seven years, I finally get PQA. Sure, I've understood the concept, and I've always asked questions using the target phrases, but I'd never spent enough time really focusing on the kids rather than the vocabulary.

“A [TPRS colleague] came into my room yesterday. She said that she had started to cut down to one target phrase per day. She said that it was easier to get repetitions, and to stay in bounds.

“So today I spent almost fifteen minutes just on the word *perezoso* (which I had used in a PMS yesterday, but hadn't worked on enough). And Jake said that he isn't lazy because he loves to do homework, and the class laughed, because he was playing the game so well, and I told the class that he was my favorite student, and practically perfect.

“And Sophia and Kenyon and Sabrina are lazy because they would rather watch T.V. than do homework, so they can't be my favorite students. And Kelsey isn't lazy because she's very athletic, but I'm sorry, she's not my favorite because she doesn't love to do homework, and besides, I can only have one favorite, so sorry about the rest of you. Jake isn't lazy and likes to do homework!

“The whole class was on the edge of their seats. I was having the best time! And even better, I am told by [another teacher] that Jake is a misfit, so to make him the star was a good thing.

“As the kids filed out at the end of the class, I heard one in the hall saying “Spanish is awesome!” It only took me seven years to get here. Today was great. Monday might be awful. But now I know the real power of PQA that others have been talking about.”

Here, Diane is clearly reaching beyond the minds of her students and into their hearts. She is using Spanish to reach her students, and not vice versa. To use Theodore Sizer's term, she is not a “deliverer of instructional services.” Knowing that learning a foreign language is reciprocal and participatory, Diane is inviting her students to participate and enjoy in shared meaning with her.

By focusing more on her kids and less on her curricular objectives from the beginning, *Diane will meet those other objectives easily*. The kids sense where her priorities lie, and will reward her with enthusiasm and hard work all year.

When the primary objective is to provide comprehensible input in a personalized setting, levels of student interest skyrocket, resulting in unprecedented levels of student achievement. These gains have captured the attention of the profession, administrators, and many parents. Those sincerely open to and seeking positive change in American foreign language education want to know why this is happening.

Susan Gross provides the answer: "You can't P too long and you can't P too much. The whole reason kids listen is because of P. The whole reason we get good classroom management is P. Teaching is connecting with every kid. That's why we teach to the eyes. We teach THEM, not a curriculum. Not a story. THEM."

Those readers familiar with the terminology of TPRS may wonder how the terms PMS and passive PMS are connected to the term PQA. I don't think the terms matter. Susie told me recently:

"I am not crazy about the term PMS. I am even less crazy about the term Passive PMS. Of course you know that I believe that PQA is the key to it all...."

My own objection to the terms PMS and passive PMS is that they are *different than* the term PQA, and thus create confusion by incorrectly conveying the idea that telling a story

is in some way *not connected* to PQA, when in fact a story is always best when it has its roots in personalized discussion.

There is an art to TPRS that supersedes the idea of steps and techniques. We engage the kids in personalized discussion (PQA), and we use comprehensible input (CI) to move the personalization (PQA) forward. It may or may not turn into a story.

While communicating with some really gifted TPRS teachers in writing this book, I noticed that a common idea seemed to emerge from all of them, reflecting Susie's statements above. All they want is CI + P, and tons of PQA. They see personalization as their *point of departure* in all classes. My own idea of telling a story is to *take PQA and just see how far it can bounce!*

Hopefully, this book reflects some of what Susie has been saying about personalization over the years.

Rationale

It is much easier to successfully personalize a classroom in the first year than later on, just as it is easier to build trust in any relationship earlier than later. Either a bridge between people is built early or it is not built at all.

Anyone who has taught a foreign language is familiar with the honeymoon period that the teacher and the students enjoy at the beginning of the year. The teacher, rested from the summer, encounters a new group of excited students. Together, they spend the first weeks in the relative ease and enjoyment of the simple things involved in starting the academic year.

Just as in any relationship, this honeymoon period of time is when the teacher *must build a bridge* to the students, one that allows the students into the classroom process *as whole people*.

How can a bridge be built that won't crumble at the first arrival of the winter winds, one that in the case of high school teachers may possibly last up to four years? Can building this bridge reverse the abysmal retention rates of the past decades, when only a handful of those excited first year students make it to the end of four years of high school study?

Can students actually be trained in such a way that almost all of them not only see their way happily through the four high school years, but continue with joy and confidence to go on and actually *master the language* after high school, either in college or through travel?

It can be done only if the students are invited from the beginning *to be themselves, to be known for the things that they do, and to be perceived by others in the class as important*. Without personalization, students do not feel important, and real language teaching cannot then occur.

Millions of American students enter our classrooms each year *expecting to learn* a new language. When we invite them into a personalized classroom full of meaningful and comprehensible discussion, they will do just that.

In authentically personalized classrooms lie also the seeds of hope for millions of Asian, Hispanic, and other new immigrant children, whose very future lies in their ability to learn English. ESL classrooms centered upon personalized comprehensible input would dramatically improve the situation of millions of immigrant children currently floundering in our public schools.

Rudimentary seeds of personalizing a classroom were sown by James Asher. By at least involving the students physically in the language, by at least moving around the room the classroom a bit, he treated them as people in an indirect way.

Tracy Terrell's text *Deux Mondes/Dos Mundos* was a great attempt to personalize a textbook around individuals. It was just too complex, however, and not comprehensible to most students. Hence, it found use only at the college level, and even at that level did not work, because no textbook can deliver personalized comprehensible input to students.

The same thing can be said for Pierre Capretz' *French in Action* program. Its material was not personalized, nor was it comprehensible for all but the most motivated college students. It didn't work.

If someone in Paris with a hand in their coat approached an American with a background of high school or college French and said, "Haut les mains/Hands up!" the following scenarios would likely play out:

1. The grammar trained student would ask for the English version.
2. The student trained in TPR only would probably ask for time to think back to their first few weeks of their language study. Not recognizing a verb (because there was none in that utterance), they would not respond to the request.
3. The student trained in memorizing expressions around district mandated thematic expressions (time, weather, etc.) would be puzzled because the expression would not have been "covered" in their classes. Trained in pure memorization of prompt responses in these areas, they would not have been able to engage in creating a real conversational flow with the thief. They might actually hurt their cause by responding to the thief, "Je me lève à huit heures du matin/I get up at 8:00 a.m."
4. The college student, having worked with one of the complicated college texts like *Deux Mondes*, would try to recreate an image in their mind of the list of memorized expressions that have to do with being robbed, but would have trouble remembering that particular expression since they had memorized approximately twenty thousand such expressions each semester during the course of their study.
5. The Capretz trained student would only understand that they were being robbed if the thief had chosen to dress like the images of thieves found in the *French in Action* videos.
6. The TPRS student would put their hands up.

There have been countless such failures as those described above in foreign language acquisition over the decades. Not until Blaine Ray figured out a way to make comprehensible input actually work through TPR Storytelling could we as a profession begin to move out of the dark ages of the twentieth century.

In fact, if Asher's work in TPR were to be compared to Blaine Ray's work in TPRStorytelling, it would be as comparing early Roman plumbing, aqueducts, et al to modern plumbing. Ray's system moves water (the target language) in such a way that

the Romans could never have imagined. Even in their relatively enlightened approach to engineering, Roman ways of moving water pale in comparison to what TPR Storytelling does.

Should Asher's TPR be used at all? Absolutely, but in the right amounts at the right times. Michael Miller of Cheyenne Mountain Junior High in Colorado Springs, CO is a master at this. As long as it is not overdone, TPR is a great support in establishing meaning and a sense of fun in the classroom.

However, after about eight TPR commands, done en masse and so easily copied by students who don't understand, TPR loses power. In my view, giving endless commands like "turn left and look over your right shoulder" is a mistake. Does it convey respect and a personal interest in the student to have them walk forward and backward twenty or thirty times under the auspices of learning?

Not only are TPR commands much more neurologically complex than most teachers think, thus making *authentic comprehensible input* less possible for most students, they lack the key ingredient of *authentic personalization*. The individual teacher must ultimately make the decision as to how much TPR to include. Personalization, on the other hand, will not be an option in the classrooms of the future.

