

The Circus is in “Tense”

Using past, present and future tenses in early TPR instruction

by Michael Miller

Bertie Segal developed the idea of the three-ring circus as a way to extend understanding of vocabulary and structure for early language learners using TPR methodology. TPR, or Total Physical Response, was developed by James Asher decades ago. This method is brilliant in that students can absorb huge amounts of language, become actively involved in the class and lower the affective filter. TPR essentially takes action verbs and concrete objects and teaches this vocabulary to students via command forms:

Stand up!
Sit down!
Touch the table!
Touch the floor!

The teacher models the action as he gives the command. Soon the teacher stops modeling and the students are left to respond physically to the commands on their own. As student comprehension grows, the teacher arranges the familiar commands into new combinations:

Stand up on the table!
Sit down on the floor!

Class time may seem like game time, but secretly students are acquiring the language in a natural way, similar to how a baby acquires his first language. Students are not forced to speak until they are ready. The technique is powerful. I personally teach 200 words and expressions in only 5 weeks using TPR and the long-term recall of these vocabulary words by the students is very high.

There is, however, a limitation on TPR. The vocabulary has to be concrete and observable. It is difficult to use TPR to get across words such as “feel” or “friendly” or “greedy”. That’s where TPR Storytelling and other natural approach methodologies come in. Another limitation of TPR is the exclusive use of command forms. Students often remember words in the command forms which can be problematic when students need to switch to indicative forms.

There is also a question about the natural approach itself. This methodology is based on how children learn their first language. It is true that many parents use command forms with their children:

Put your shoes on!

Now make a fist and stick your arms in the sleeves!
Don't pick your nose!

But parents also use a variety of sentences using various tenses as well as indicative and subjunctive forms:

Did you eat that cookie?
Are you going to be a good boy today?
Would you be a good boy if I gave you a cookie?

Parents use these forms without thinking about the supposed difficulty of verb tenses. It is natural to use these tenses. The only thing that is sheltered is the vocabulary. A parent probably wouldn't say:

Do you have gastrointestinal inflammation?

Instead the parent would say:

Do you have a tummy ache?

The tense is exactly the same. It is simply the choice of vocabulary that is simplified.

This is all fine and well, but what do we do with this in class? How do we teach the tenses to beginners in a natural way? Is there a way to accomplish this goal with TPR?

Thankfully, yes! Bertie Segal developed the "Three-ring Circus" years ago. This technique provides comprehensible input using a variety of tenses, and yet still falls under the umbrella of TPR.

Here's what you do: Before class choose three phrases that your class is working on with TPR. Let's say for example:

Throw the paper in the trash can!
Fall on the floor!
Write on the chalkboard!

The first time you do this, you should just have three students come up and do the commands as you say them. This uses the imperative forms. While the three students are performing their "acts", you can ask the rest of the class questions in the present indicative (usually 3rd person) about what is going on. The TPR Storytelling technique called "circle of questions" provides a formula for asking questions.

Let's say that Joe is throwing the paper in the trash can, Sally is falling on the floor, and Jim is writing on the chalkboard.

Now you ask the rest of the class questions such as:

Is Joe throwing the paper in the trash can?
Is Joe throwing the paper in the trash can or on the floor?
Is Joe throwing the paper on the floor?
Is Joe throwing the paper in the trash can?
Yes, Joe is throwing the paper in the trash can.

Typically the class only needs to respond with one-word answers: Yes, no, a name, or an object. Teachers can also ask “who”, “what” or “where” questions with this technique. The translations for “who”, “what” and “where” should be on the wall somewhere for students to see. Questions can also be mixed up so that students don’t end up following a predictable pattern.

Who is throwing the paper in the trash can?
Is Sally throwing the paper in the trash can?
Is Joe throwing the paper in the trash can?
Is Joe throwing Sally in the trash can?
Is Joe throwing Jim in the trash can?
What is Joe throwing in the trash can?
Where is Joe throwing the paper?
Is Sally falling on the trash can?
Is Sally falling on the floor?
Where is Sally falling? On the trash can or on the floor?
Is Sally falling on Joe?
Is Sally falling on Jim?
Who is writing on the chalkboard?
Is Jim writing on the chalkboard?
Where is Jim writing?
Is Jim writing on Sally?
Is Jim writing on Joe?
Is Joe writing on the chalkboard?
Is Sally writing on the chalkboard?
Is the trash can on the floor?
Is the chalkboard on the floor?
Is Sally on the floor?
Where is the trash can?
What is in the trash can?
On what is Jim writing?

As you can see, the questions could go on and on. Asking students questions such as these keeps students engaged in the lesson, and gives the teacher a continual way to assess whether students understand the vocabulary or not. The sentences practice regular question formation in the 3rd person indicative. The questions also give students the necessary repetitions of the vocabulary without being dull. The class becomes engaged in the vocabulary, and there is a fair dose of humor to make the lesson fun. The three actors are often fun, but some of the questions are funny as well.

Once students get used to answering these questions, you can introduce other tenses. I usually introduce the future tense after a week and then the past tense a week after that. This means that my beginners are hearing and responding to three indicative tenses and the imperative tense after only three weeks.

When I introduce the future form, I tell the students that we are going to do the Three-Ring Circus, but I'm going to tell students in advance what three activities are going to be performed. We choose three volunteers to perform the actions, but they don't come up right away. In German, I prepare the students by saying:

"I have seen the future, and the future is *wird*" (weird).

For those who aren't familiar with German, "wird" is the helping verb used with the future tense, similar to the English word "will." With that said I now ask for the volunteers:

Who will sing to the flag?
Who will slap his cheek?
Who will crawl on the table?

Let's say that Susie will sing to the flag, Bob will slap his cheek, and Jane will crawl on the table. These actors still haven't come up yet. But the class knows who they are and I can ask questions in the future tense:

Is Susie going to sing to the flag?
Is Susie going to sing to the flag or to Bob?
Is Susie going to sing to Bob?
No, Susie is not going to sing to Bob; Susie is going to sing to the flag.
Is Bob going to slap his cheek?
Is Bob going to slap Susie?
Is Susie going to slap Bob?
Who is going to slap his cheek?
What is Bob going to slap?
Is Jane going to crawl on the table?
Is Jane going to crawl on Bob?
Is Jane going to crawl on the flag?
Is the flag going to crawl on Jane?
Where is Jane going to crawl?
To what is Susie going to sing?

Again, the possibilities are endless. Then I have our actors come up. I use the command forms (imperative) to have my students perform the actions, and then I ask a circle of questions using present tense:

Who is singing to the flag?
Who is slapping his cheek?
Who is crawling on the table?

Is Bob crawling on the table?
Is Bob slapping his cheek?
Is Susie slapping Bob?
Is Susie slapping Bob with the flag?
Is Jane slapping Bob with the table?
Where is Jane crawling?
What is Bob slapping?

There are, of course, more questions to ask. Finally I have the actors sit down and I ask the class about the actions in the past tense. The first time I do this, I prepare the class by saying:

“The past uses the “ge-verb” at the end because the verb passes to the end of the sentence.”

Again, for non-German speakers, the past tense is formed with a helping verb (*hat* or *ist*) and a participle that is usually formed with a *ge-* at the beginning. The participle “passes” to the end of the sentence. Of course, German teachers know that I am talking about the conversational past here. Then I go through more questions in the past tense:

Who crawled on the table?
Who slapped his cheek?
Who sang to the flag?
Did Sally sing to the flag?
Did Sally sing to Bob?
Did Sally sing to Jane?
Where did Jane crawl?
Did Jane crawl on Susie?
Did Jane crawl on the flag?
Did Jane crawl on the table or on Bob?
What did Bob slap?
Did Bob slap the table?
Did Bob slap the flag?
Did Bob slap his cheek?
Did Bob slap Susie?
Did Bob slap Jane?

I personally used this technique for the first time at the beginning of the 2004-5 school year. I saw very positive results. At the end of our TPR phase, which lasts about 5-6 weeks, I gave the students a short quiz to see if they could pick out tenses and translate sentences using correct tenses in English. First I said six sentences to the students in German. Students simply had to identify whether the sentences were in the present, past or future. Here are the sentences:

- 1) Sarah schaut die Tafel an (Sarah looks at the board)
- 2) Franz wird das Buch aufmachen (Franz will open the book)
- 3) Der Affe klopft an die Tür (the monkey knocks on the door)
- 4) Das Mädchen hat gelacht (the girl laughed)
- 5) Der Junge hat Cola getrunken (the boy drank cola)

6) Der Professor wird langsam gehen (the professor will walk slowly)

Then I repeated sentences #1, #2 and #4 and asked students to translate those three sentences into English, using the appropriate tense. I told the students that the results would not affect their grades; it was just for me to see. I tallied up the scores. Students on average got 85% of the questions right. Most of the mistakes were in translation. The second sentence can be somewhat difficult for beginning students to translate. The assessment did not include any kind of production—just recognition and translation of the tenses.

I plan to use tenses in throughout the year as we tell stories with TPRS. I am curious to see the results. Perhaps I will write an update in a year. At least for now I am pleased with the results I see and am excited to see what the future will bring.