

How Well Do TPRS Students Do on the AP?

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Introduction

When compared to traditional approaches, students in comprehension-based classes do quite well, at least as well on tests of form and consistently better on tests requiring communication. (Krashen, 1982, 2003). Recent evaluations include several studies of TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling) (Varguez, 2009; Watson, 2009; Dziedzic, 2012), comparing students with traditionally-taught students after one year of language class.

We report here on an attempt to determine if TPRS can succeed over a longer term, comparing TPRS scores of students who have had TPRS-based high school classes with those of the entire group of students who took the AP examination that year.

Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling - TPRS

TPRS (Ray and Seely, 2015) is a method designed to be consistent with the Comprehension Hypothesis, which states that we acquire language when we understand what we hear and read, that is, when we obtain *comprehensible input*. It has been proposed that comprehensible input is most effective when it is *compelling*—so interesting that we are completely focused on the message, on what we are hearing or reading (Krashen, 2011).

TPRS attempts to provide compelling comprehensible input through stories. In TPRS, the teacher and students *co-create* stories in class, with the stories generally involving the students themselves as characters. This *personalization* is considered to be a very effective means of making input compelling (Rowan, 2013; Hedstrom, 2014; Pippins, 2015). Reading, a powerful means of stimulating language and literacy development (Krashen, 2003), is included in the form of students reading the co-created stories and simplified readers, many created by experienced TPRS teachers.

Some grammar is included in the form of short explanations delivered at moments when the grammar point is relevant—*pop-up grammar*—a procedure consistent with research showing that consciously learned grammar is of limited use in language comprehension and production (Krashen, 2003).

The AP Examination

The AP Spanish language examination measures academic language achievement, and according to the College Board is typically taken by those with from three to five years of middle and high school Spanish study.
(http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/exam/exam_information/4554.html)

Students in this study took the AP Spanish examination in May, 2014. One half of the examination score was based on reading and listening to passages and answering multiple choice questions, and one half was based on written and oral *free responses*. In both parts, students are required to deal with *interpersonal* topics (e.g. an email reply in writing) and *presentational* topics (e.g. a persuasive essay). Each section takes about 90 minutes.

The AP is scored on a one to five scale (<https://apscore.collegeboard.org/scores/about-ap-scores>), with colleges typically granting credit for scores of 3 or higher (http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/courses/teachers_corner/221798.html). The University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma, for example, awards 13

credits for a score of 3 (three courses), 16 credits for a score of 4 (four courses), and 19 credits for a score of 5 (five courses)

(<https://apstudent.collegeboard.org/creditandplacement/credit-policy-detail?diCode=6879&orgId=2317&name=University%20of%20Oklahoma&address=Norman%2C%20OK>).

Subjects

This study focused on the achievement of 13 students enrolled at Norman High School in Norman, Oklahoma. All had taken beginning Spanish in grade 8, which included some grammar instruction, and then took four years of Spanish in high school with the same teacher (DP): Spanish 2,3,4, and AP Spanish.

Curriculum

Students in this cohort all had an AP preparation class in their last year of high school, one that was not significantly different from model classes posted on the College Board website

(http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/courses/teachers_corner/3499.html?excmpid=MTG243-PR-32-cd); there was little emphasis on direct teaching of grammar and vocabulary, and a great deal of reading, discussion, and writing in areas that are the focus of the examination.

For these students, however, Spanish 2, 3, 4 were different from what students experience in traditional classes. All emphasized comprehensible input and included TPRS techniques, sustained silent reading, daily PQA (personalized questions and answers), reading and discussion of novels, Reader's Theater (with students acting out parts of the novels in costumes with props), and songs (including Señor Wooly videos). There was no error correction, no teaching of explicit grammar (but pop-up grammar was included), no grading of writing for accuracy, no grammar worksheets or verb charts, and no textbooks were used.

Results

Table 1 compares scores provided by the College Board for all non-native Spanish speaking students who took the AP test in May, 2014 (n = 41,627 students) with scores achieved by the 13 students at Norman High School. None of the students in table 1 spoke Spanish regularly outside of school and none had lived in a country where Spanish was spoken for more than one month.

	College Board 2014	Norman High School
5	18.5	23.1
4	33.2	15.4
3	32.9	46.2
2	12.6	15.4
1	2.8	0
mean	3.52	3.46

Table 1: Percentage scoring at each level*

Percent scoring 3 or higher:

College Board = 84.6%; Norman = 84.6%

*Source: Student Score Distributions 2014, The College Board.

<http://blog.prepscholar.com/average-ap-scores-for-every-ap-exam>

The Norman scores are nearly identical to the national sample, suggesting that significant acquisition of academic language can be attained with only modest amounts of direct instruction.

Potential Confounds

Poverty

Poverty has a large impact on all measures of academic achievement. Free and reduced lunch data suggests that there was no difference between the College Board and Norman High School samples: the national rate of free and reduced lunch for all schools in the US is 51% (Rich, 2015) and the Norman High School rate was 47.5% in 2012-2013 (<http://high-schools.com/directory/ok/cities/norman/norman-high-school/402172001082/>).

This is, however, only suggestive, as the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch is a crude measure of the level of poverty, and we have no assurance that the College Board sample is representative of the country and that the Norman High School Spanish AP sample is representative of the school sample.

The Design

There was no confirmation of the TPRS class activities done by impartial observers.

It is possible that some diligent students did grammar and vocabulary study on their own, in secret; this was not investigated.

It could be claimed that the small amount of grammar instruction students had in grade 8 was sufficient to provide a basis for their subsequent progress. If so, our results indicate that an extensive grammar foundation is not necessary for success in developing academic language.

In addition, we have assumed that students in the College Board sample had traditional instruction that differed significantly from the method used in the Norman High School sample. Several observers have concluded that high school Spanish in the US is taught in general using an “eclectic approach” which includes wide use of the direct teaching of grammar (http://www.researchgate.net/post/How_is_spanish_taught_in_the_US_or_UK).

Finally, we are comparing the performance of students who had one teacher with students who had many different teachers. We must ask if the achievement of the Norman High School sample is the result of the method or the teacher. As noted earlier, other studies have compared comprehension-based methods, such as TPRS, with traditional methods, and comprehension-based methods have never lost, strongly suggesting that the method is highly effective.

Conclusions

Despite the obvious lacunae, this study confirms that classes that include substantial amounts of comprehensible input made compelling through taking students’ interests very seriously and through personalization of classroom activities, and including far less formal grammar and vocabulary instruction than is done in traditional classes, does not produce disastrous results. They do about as well as other AP students do on the AP test. As the students seem to have enjoyed their Spanish classes, we predict that they are more likely to continue their involvement with Spanish beyond high school.

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Please submit your articles to IJFLT as a Word or Word-compatible document and use the settings outlined below.

In the interest of efficiency, articles that do not conform to these guidelines will be returned to the author for revision.

The Research and Teacher to Teacher sections have some different style requirements; please use the guidelines that apply to your submission. Please send all submissions to ijflteditor@gmail.com

ALL SUBMISSIONS Paper size: 8.5" x 11"

Margins: 1.5" left and right, 1.25" top and 1.5" bottom

Tabs: set at .25", .75" and 1.25"; every .5" thereafter as needed

Font: Times New Roman, 12 pt. for text, 10 pt. for abstract, footnotes, and references. If additional fonts are necessary, such as in the case of data display, please ensure that they will display correctly when the document is converted to PDF. If a fixed-width font is necessary for diagrams, use the Courier family.

Spacing: Sentences should be separated by one space. All lines should be single-spaced. Headers and footers: None. These will be added when your article is inserted into the journal. RESEARCH Article Sections:

1. Title and Abstract: The entire title should be aligned left. The first word of the title and subtitle and all proper nouns should be capitalized. The first line should contain the title and subtitle of the paper in 16 pt., followed by one blank line in 16 pt., followed by the author's name in 14 pt. The next line contains the author's affiliation (such as the university) in 12 pt. italics. Insert 2 blank lines immediately before the text of the abstract, which should be aligned at the third tab stop (1.25"). Use 10 pt. italics and use a maximum of 300 words. Insert 2 blank lines after the abstract in 12 pt.
2. Section headings: Should be separated by the previous section by 2 blank lines and from the section text by one blank line.
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4. Examples: Should be in italics. Their glosses in running text should be in single quotes. For numbered examples, place the number in parentheses and tabbed once (0.25"). The rest of the text for that example should be aligned with its gloss using tabs rather than spaces. Use small caps for items like case markers and other

instances where items are not literally translated into English. The idiomatic gloss should be on the following line, in single quotes, and examples should be separated from the text and from other examples by one blank line. If there are multiple examples per example number, the lettered sub-examples should be one tab stop away from the example number. So, if the example is tabbed at 0.25, the sub-example(s) should be tabbed at 0.5. If the language variety needs to be made clear, it can be enclosed in parentheses and right aligned on the line directly above the example. For standard morpheme labels and glossing rules, please refer to the Leipzig Glossing Rules at www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/pdf/Glossing-Rules.pdf

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- Should be a teaching idea that is applicable in the classroom by other teachers
- Should be short.
- Should not assume that readers are familiar with terminology like TPRS or CI or the 5Cs.
- Should write for an international audience, showing that the technique could be applied to any language.
- Avoid using idiomatic expressions in English.
- Avoid using informal language. (It was so cool! Can you believe it?)
- Speak of your own experience and your own strategies and provide step-by-step instructions for teachers who might not be familiar with the background information. While this section is somewhat less formal than the Research section, please follow the guidelines above regarding font, page size, margins, tabs, spacing, and footnotes. Be sure to check the veracity and accuracy of that information carefully and then cite your source.