

Practically Speaking English

Practically Speaking English Methodology

The Practically Speaking English architecture is highly energized and highly interactive. The atmosphere of the entire experience is intended to encourage each and every student to participate in individual and group practices that are oriented towards the communicative development of oral skills. At every level of proficiency in English, the student is quickly and intentionally moved towards a higher confidence level in personal interaction and increased proficiency in personal oral expression. Since the focus of the course is oral communication, reading and writing activities are minimized.

The lower levels of proficiency utilize Total Physical Response (see the TPR article below) for vocabulary and phrasal learning and substitution principles to develop learned sentence structures that can be reused and recombined to form new expressions. The mid and upper levels of proficiency use these same methods for the introduction of new vocabulary and expression in combination with abstract and contemporaneous expression exercises that facilitate rapid and confident oral communication.

The classes are entirely in English, even at the primary levels. Translation in the classroom is limited to basic procedural instruction (class room management issues, for example) and in giving directions for “home work” and at home, self practice assignments.

The curriculum was developed based on field experience in many different cultural settings and is culturally unbiased, except that the English expressions reflect usage in the United States. The curriculum utilizes a focused approach that guides the instructor in effectively using TPR, individual and group practice, use of high visibility charts, cue cards and hands-on props. The eight unit curriculum is further focused on conversational elements that are immediately useful to the student. Rather than a theoretical approach to language, Practically Speaking English revolves around the practical (in other words, immediately useful) elements of the language. The curriculum is currently used every week by organizations that are teaching English to non-English speakers in the United States and abroad.

Instructors are all native speakers of American English who have volunteered to bring high quality English learning to students abroad and in the United States. Our instructors perform on a voluntary basis, receiving no pay or compensation of any kind. Each has been trained in the specific use of the curriculum and the techniques and methods that are essential to the effective application of the curriculum. Some instructors are professional teachers, but most come from various professional and semi-professional backgrounds. Practically Speaking English training events are conducted in locations across the United States and all instructors are subjected to intensive preparation and training prior to being accepted as an instructor of Practically Speaking English. Further, instructors are supervised

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in the course venue to assure that each student receives the highest quality learning experience.

Our instructors not only impart the language skills to the student, they also develop an informal and personal relationship with the students that results in a relaxed classroom environment. The instructor intentionally reduces classroom stress so that each student can boldly practice and see immediate success. As time permits, English practice continues as students and instructors take advantage of opportunities to communicate before class as students arrive and after classes as students are leaving.

The Practically Speaking English leadership staff has been conducting high quality, intensive conversational English courses in the United States and abroad since 1992. Since the year 2000, more than twenty-five thousand adults have participated in these courses in various countries of the world. Due to the popularity of this course, it has been conducted on university campuses, in high schools and in church buildings in ten different countries.

Our students represent a broad range of the population of the host country. While many of our students are so-called "average" people, it is quite normal to find politicians, military professionals, doctors, lawyers, professors and entertainment celebrities in our course.

*Total Physical Response (TPR)

Total Physical Response or TPR, introduces the language through the use of commands (imperative sentences) and has students demonstrate their understanding through action responses. In TPR, the instructor becomes a movie director who guides actors - the students - through complicated scenes much like a parent guiding an infant through intimate caretaking situations. And just as the infant develops an intricate understanding of spoken language, students acquire, with pleasure, an in- depth understanding of the target language.

When working with beginning students, the TPR instructor starts with simple directions in a relationship that is like a caring parent interacting with an infant. For example, the instructor will utter a direction in the target language and model with one or more students. The instructor may say, "stand up" (the instructor and a student sitting on either side of the instructor will immediately stand up). Then, "sit down," and everyone sits down. "Stand up. .sit down . . .stand up. . .sit down ."

When the students are responding with confidence, the instructor may say, "walk" and the instructor and students walk forward. Then, "stop" and everyone stops. Again, "walk" and everyone walks until the instructor says, "stop" and everyone stops. "Turn" and the instructor along with the students will turn. Again, "turn" and everyone turns. Once more, "turn" and everyone turns.

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The instructor, like a caring parent, is sensitive to whether the students are receiving the messages. The body movements of each student will signal immediately how comfortable they feel. If there is hesitation, for instance, the skillful instructor will slow down and continue to work with a routine in a compassionate manner until each student feels confident enough to act alone in response to the instructor's directions.

The objective is to "lower the filter" (that is, reduce stress) while simultaneously building the student's self-confidence. A successful TPR experience results in the students saying to themselves, "I CAN DO THIS. I CAN DO IT."

While the initial instructions are simple, within a few minutes directions can be expanded in complexity such as:

Stand up. Walk to the cabinet. Open the drawer of the cabinet and look for a bottle of aspirin. Pick up the bottle. Close the drawer and walk quickly to Mary. Offer her the bottle. Mary, take the bottle from him and...

As the training advances, past tense, future tense, and essentially all the elements of the target language can be woven into these commands. After a number of TPR sessions, the students, just like young children, will spontaneously begin to speak the language, and this skill transfers easily into reading and writing. The instructor works with and encourages these developments, but does not force them.

*James Asher is a professor of psychology at San Jose State University in California. This article is excerpted from his book, *Learning Another Language Through Actions: The Complete Teacher's Guidebook*.