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## Tips for Teachers

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### **Building Confidence as a Precursor to Building Fluency** Satoko Watkins, Ferris University, Yokohama, Japan

As part of my student teaching practicum experience, I had the chance to privately tutor a false beginner ESL student. He had taken over six years of required English courses in middle and high school but, as an international student in Honolulu, was essentially still in the “silent period” as a speaker of English, seldom able to respond to his teacher or classmates. The lessons that I designed, with guidance from my practicum supervisor, allowed him to realize how much English he already knew and to build his confidence. Fluency followed. In just twelve weeks, he made dramatic progress.

Some of the strategies that we employed, such as Total Physical Response (TPR), will be familiar to experienced teachers, and I had learned about TPR in my TESOL courses, too. However, until I saw variations of these activities in action with my student, I could not fully understand or appreciate their potential for building confidence and fluency, particularly in settings where a structural approach and high stakes testing dominate. I hope my observations will help other novice teachers like me visualize the potential of employing TPR, wordless picture books, the Language Experience Approach (LEA), shadowing, and games to build confidence and then fluency in their students, too.

#### **Total Physical Response Variations**

In a typical Total Physical Response (TPR) lesson, the teacher gives commands such as *stand up*, *sit down*, *touch the floor*, and *point to the cloud*. At first, she models the actions so that students can learn from watching her as they listen to her commands. Soon, students can respond without the teacher’s model, and before long, start to give commands of their own. TPR provides students with comprehensible input and an opportunity to actively respond to the target language without pressure to produce it before they feel ready. In a class of young,

active language learners, standing and moving about the classroom is a good idea. However, with reluctant adult students or large crowded classes, such TPR commands may not be practicable. I adapted TPR routines using an assortment of small objects that my student and I could manipulate at his desk.

### Week 1

I asked him to pick up and put down a few small items. At first, he was very nervous responding to my commands; however, he gradually became familiar with the actions and the language. After some practice, I asked him to mimic me in return. His commands began as one or two words. For example, he pointed to a green circle and said “*Green circle.*” Guessing at what he meant, I picked up the green circle.

### Week 2

Already he was able to respond to my commands faster and with more confidence. Moreover, when it was his turn to give commands, he began to say, “*Green circle pick up.*”

### Week 3

I added some new items. He quickly asked me the names for the new objects. I also added “*Can you*” before the commands, saying for example, “*Can you pick up . . .*” and “*Can you put down . . .*” He was able to respond to them although he could not yet utilize “*Can you*” phrases in his commands to me.

### Weeks 4–6

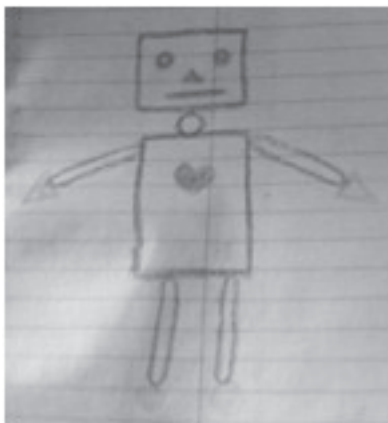
I added more prepositional phrases of location to my commands such as *next to*, *on top of*, and *under*. He learned to respond to them quickly. When it was his turn to give commands, he gradually started to use the new prepositional phrases as well as “*Can you*” phrases; however, he had difficulty using them in a grammatical way.



For example, he said “*Can you . . . green circle and red square put on*” instead of “*Can you put the green circle on the red square?*” The picture shows an arrangement that I created following my student’s commands in Week 6.

### Weeks 7–12

For our final TPR activity, we practiced the colors, shapes, and phrases of location using a picture transfer activity. First, we individually drew pictures using the colors, shapes, and objects that we had learned. Next, I told him how to draw my picture with commands such as “*Draw a green circle next to the red square.*” Without looking at my original picture, he drew what he understood from my commands. After some practice, he described his picture to me.



### “Reading” a Wordless Picture Book

I showed my student wordless picture books and had him describe what he saw or tell the story he saw in the pictures. This required him to activate English that he already had in a creative way. Being able to do this was a huge confidence builder. It also provided me with diagnostic information about his vocabulary and grammar levels. He started by pointing to the pictures and making one-word utterances such as “*fishing*” or “*art.*” By Week 9, he was producing complete sentences such as “*He is drinking water*” and “*He has books.*”

At the end of our time together, I asked him for feedback on our materials and routines by rating each one from 1 (not much) to 5 (great) in the categories of Interest, Usefulness, and Difficulty. He rated the wordless books as highly interesting, highly useful, and moderately difficult. However, he expressed a preference for picture search activity books over books with a definite, though wordless, storyline. He found that in activity books, each page stands alone as a task-based exercise, and he had the freedom to choose his point of focus. With wordless story books, he felt less confident about trying to fit his words to the

author's story. In the future, I will probably use picture activity books with less proficient students and wordless story books with students who have higher English proficiency or with students who are more confident than this student was. (See Resources for examples of each.)

### **Language Experience Approach**

In the Language Experience Approach (LEA), teachers listen to what students say and write it down for them. Then, students read the story that they have dictated. Since the ideas and words originate with the students, the story is naturally meaningful and comprehensible for them. Moreover, the process of creating the text is student-centered and demonstrates to students that their thoughts and language are valued. In our practice with LEA, particularly at the beginning, I often had to ask my student many questions to elicit a short story. It was somewhat painful for both of us. At the same time, he was generally amazed when he saw his words typed up as a finished story, so we continued with the activity. Over time, his growing fluency and sophistication was evident to both of us. More important, he began planning his stories and dictating them to me without my having to prod him with questions. After about ten weeks, he dictated this story:

*Last Saturday, I went to Koko Marina Shopping Center in Hawaii Kai. It's near my house. It took me 25 minutes by bus. I was not looking for anything particular. I was just walking around. On Sunday, I went to Waikiki Beach with my friend. We surfed again. He did very well, and I did okay. We surfed for three hours, and we were tired.*

### **Shadowing**

In shadowing, students listen to an audio recording or teacher's voice and immediately repeat what they hear. The goal is to focus on and mimic stress and intonation patterns and conversation strategies rather than particular sounds or words. After writing and reading LEA stories for several weeks, I asked him to try shadowing my reading of his stories because I wanted him to focus on the intonation of connected phrases rather than word-by-word reading. He initially had difficulty in shadowing and preferred reproduction or waiting for me to finish a sentence before he repeated it. Gradually, however, he began to shadow me. At

first, he was able to pick up only content words, but he became more fluent every week, and in the end, he was able to shadow most function words as well.

### Card Games

Games are often used in ESL/EFL classrooms as an effective instructional tool and a means of lowering student anxiety, fostering interaction, and providing an authentic context for language use. My student and I played a simple commercial language learner card game (see Resources) that is a variation of the card game commonly called Go Fish in which players take turns asking each other for particular cards as they try to accumulate matching pairs or sets. The version that we played required my student to ask for pictures of people wearing particular clothes or carrying particular accessories, for example. He was initially confused by *be* verbs and *do* questions and often produced questions such as “*Is she have blue dress?*” However, he improved every week, and at the end of our course, he rated this activity highly in all categories. That is, he considered it useful, interesting, and challenging.

### Conclusion

Both my student and I benefitted from using the activities described here. He had fun and developed both confidence and fluency in using his English. I had the opportunity to try using a number of activities that I had learned about as a student but had not seen in use before. I hope other novice teachers will find the following annotated list of resources helpful.

### Resources

Anno, M. *Anno's Journey*. (1997). New York, NY: Putnam & Grosset Group.

Mitsumasa Anno is best known for delightful wordless picture books featuring a traveler on a journey through, for example, Japan, Europe, or the United States. In this book, Anno begins his journey alone, buys a horse, and rides through northern European scenes, experiencing its geography, architecture, and people along the way. The careful “reader” can find mini-stories, visual jokes, and other interesting details in each page. My student found it difficult to tell these stories in his words, but more fluent students will probably enjoy them very much.

Fuchs, M. and Critchley, J. (1986). *Families: 10 card games for language learners*. Brattleboro, VT: Pro Lingua Associates.

These cards engage language learners in a variety of games similar to the game commonly known as Go Fish. The cards are wordless, so they can be used for any playing in any language.

Hanford, M. (1997). *Where's Waldo now?* Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

Where's Waldo and Where's Wally activity books have detailed, colorful illustrations with appealing scenes, famous places, hidden objects, and visual humor. My student began by simply pointing to a scene and describing it with color plus object expressions. Soon, he realized that he knew many verbs that he could use to describe what people were doing. Of course, he enjoyed finding Waldo and his friends, too. Beginners can point and name; intermediate students can describe what they see; advanced students can read the storyline, history, and trivia that appear on each page. Everyone will have fun.

Murphey, T. (2001). Exploring Conversational Shadowing. *Language Teaching Research*, 5(2), 128–155.

This article can provide some important background reading for people who are not familiar with shadowing. Demonstration videos of shadowing techniques are also available on YouTube.

*Spot the differences: Art masterpieces mysteries series*. (2010). Mineola, NY: Dover.

*Spot the Differences* books feature two versions of world famous paintings shown side-by-side with the original on the left and a fake on the right. In the margins are short stories about the painter, the painting, or the historic period depicted in the painting. Students with varying levels of English proficiency can use the books in different ways. This series has the added benefit of being great for adults who can enjoy a game-like activity without feeling that it is childish.

**About the Author**

*Satoko Watkins completed her MA in TESOL at Hawai'i Pacific University in 2011. She is currently teaching at Ferris University and Bunkyo University near her home in Yokohama, Japan. She enjoys designing and teaching content-based English classes on themes related to global issues.*