



Focus on
EXCELLENCE

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World Famous Research on
COPEPODS

Scholarship at Middle Tennessee State University

Revolutionizing Teaching

If you're like many Americans, you took a couple years of French or Spanish in high school—because you had to—and another two years in college to get your degree. And you don't remember a word of it.

Statistics show that approximately 95 percent of students enrolled in foreign languages in the United States drop out of the program before achieving minimal communicative skills; the figures for college programs alone are even higher. So what needs to change?

Dr. Shelley Thomas, associate professor of Foreign Languages and Literatures at MTSU, had been wondering that too. While attending an American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) conference in 1999, she learned about TPR (Total Physical Response) and TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling). It's been shown that students taught foreign languages using these methods achieve high scores on standardized tests at secondary and post-secondary levels.

"When I learned about this, I had already been a teacher for over twenty years, and I thought, I need to get this out there, like, tomorrow," she says. "I developed a graduate class on these methods to start teaching future teachers right away."

TPR and TPRS use body movement and storytelling, two means by which new information gets put into long-term memory; these are elements of what's known as brain-compatible learning. This might seem a bit obvious—we use our brains to learn everything, don't we? Sure—but then what happened to you in that high school Spanish class?

The answer is that traditional language instruction, focusing on memorization and workbook drills, teaches to short-term memory. But now we know that learning

that's compatible with the way the brain stores information stays with you. Brain-based learning must be a positive, fun, constantly changing physical experience that happens in a comfortable, stress-free environment.

Getting information to stay in the learner's long-term memory through techniques such as body movement is the basis of Total Physical Response and Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling, innovative teaching methods Shelley Thomas has perfected.

photos by J. Intintoli





And since research has shown that 99 percent of learning is subconscious, it makes sense to place students in an environment that supports nonfocused (subconscious) learning that occurs naturally. TPR/TPRS are considered brain-compatible methods because they make use of props, colored visuals, appropriate music, games, stories, and activities that provide a context for the subject at hand.

How does this work in practice? Using the foreign language, the teacher tells her class to stand and performs the action for them; they stand. Continuing to model the desired movement, the teacher issues commands that the students hear and follow. “TPR deals with concrete vocabulary that doesn’t need translation. For example, ‘touch the chair’ is an action including an object that can be demonstrated without translation,” Dr. Thomas says. “And that’s the beauty of it:

“I’ve had entry level students who have never heard or seen French before, and by the third lesson they can write about eighty to a hundred words...”

it produces an immediate immersion experience and comprehension at the same time. We know from research that unless there’s comprehensible input, there’s no acquisition of languages.”

When Thomas returned from that teachers’ conference, she took a sabbatical, got some training in TPR/TPRS, and did a large amount of reading on brain-based learning. She developed a teaching plan based on the methods and got permission to start using it in her Honors French classes in lieu of the traditional grammar text. Students’ positive responses let her know that she was on to something revolutionary. She brought in Bert Segal Cook, perhaps the best professionally trained TPR professional consultant in the country, for her graduate students and continued to learn herself. In 2002, Thomas also began an intensive three-year program to become certified in brain-based teaching, which she completed in the summer of 2005.

Students in Thomas’s first-year classes today learn vocabulary dealing with their bodies, clothing, the classroom environment, and family. “I’ve had entry level students who have never heard or seen French before, and by the third lesson they can write about eighty to a hundred words,” she says. Thomas has crafted a lesson plan that evolves from TPR the first month (“it takes about four weeks for me to TPR all the actions and all the relevant vocabulary that are needed for a first-semester level group”) into TPRS, where students learn abstract vocabulary and grammatical structure as they transition into speaking and writing.

What’s really put MTSU on the language acquisition map, though, is the Summer Language Institute (SLI) and the opportunities it affords Thomas and others to add to the research on brain-based learning. The Institute has brought in superior language teachers from all over the world and draws students from across the country and world who are eager

to experience TPR/TPRS firsthand, while offering a real service to the local community as well.

Thomas began the SLI in 2003 with seed money from a special projects grant. It offered an accelerated (five-day) Spanish class designed to meet the needs of people in the community who interface with the region’s growing Hispanic population. Taught by Blaine Ray, the creator of TPRS, it was a resounding success. Succeeding summers have seen a variety of languages offered—Spanish, French, Russian, German, and Mandarin. ESL (English as a Second Language), the most recent addition, is unusual in that it is provided free of charge.

The goals of SLI are threefold: to explore brain-based teaching methods, provide accelerated training for language students, and act as a training ground for teachers by allowing them to experience the effectiveness of these methods themselves. It’s provided an enormous amount of data, which Thomas has been invited to present at regional and national conferences, with the result that MTSU is known as a hub for the research and application of TPR and TPRS.

It doesn’t stop there. Because language is at the root of all communication—between mother and child, manager and employee, nation and nation—these revolutionary methods of language acquisition have the potential to change the world in ways large and small.

In March 2006, Thomas was approached by the director of a grant program tasked with restructuring and improving the Department of Children’s Services (DCS); the partnership formed will bring Spanish language training to 4,000 DCS employees and generate an enormous amount of data for analysis, not to mention positively affecting the lives of countless children in the state of Tennessee.

Thomas has initiated or facilitated a number of exchange programs, providing TPR/TPRS training to exchange students who then take the methods home with them ... to China, to Europe, and India. She has personally helped India’s nonprofit Isha Foundation develop a program to train English teachers who will staff schools for tribal villages across India. Thomas is working on developing a language institute in India that will exchange teachers with MTSU, including providing Hindi and Arabic-speaking teachers trained in TPR/TPRS.

In the end, Thomas just wants people to experience how fun and easy it can be to learn a second language, maybe two or more ... and to graduate a few more foreign language majors. “I’m always amazed at the reaction when people learn I’m a teacher of foreign language,” she says with a twinkle in her eye. “They say, ‘Oh I wish I could speak a foreign language; I took one in school, but it didn’t work.’ Now I can tell them it will work, and it’s never too late to begin.” ■



Thomas not only has shared language teaching methods in the US but she has also spent time in India and China sharing this revolutionary approach to learning a second language.

photos provided by Shelley Thomas