

## **For Latin Teachers: How to try a bit of TPRS next week (or tomorrow).**

By John Piazza, with Bob Patrick and David Maust.

Although TPRS is a holistic method that works best when a teacher has “taken the plunge,” doing so requires a certain amount of training, practice, reflection, and sometimes a bit of personal and professional risk. Those of us who use CI-based methods usually began by trying a few things, and met with so much success in terms of student engagement and comprehension, that these first baby steps gave us the courage to try more. So, here we offer a way to begin. This is not “official” TPRS, and is not endorsed by any expert. But this document is based on the successful classroom experiences of Latin teachers.

We have designed this mini-curriculum in a way that it could be inserted into a traditional curriculum without putting the class too far behind. In fact, you may find that on the essentials of the unit, students progress faster than expected.

(Note: many of these techniques are based on those developed by Ben Slavic. His website and publications contain detailed descriptions. Go to [benslavic.com](http://benslavic.com))

### **1. Set the ground rules.**

In order for an activity like this to go smoothly, students need to know what is expected of them. Failure to do this can result in a chaotic classroom, distracted students, and not much learning taking place. Before you begin, tell the class that you are going to try a different approach, and you need their help in order to do this. First, tell them that when you speak Latin, everything you say in to them is fascinating, and they must respond accordingly. So a statement should be met with “ooh, aahh,” every time. You can use a grandiose gesture to cue them on this, e.g. lifting your upturned palms to heaven, etc.

Second, tell them that if you ask a question, it must be met with “ita/certe” or “minime,” and you must hear it from everyone, every time. This keeps their responses (and frustration levels) to a minimum. It also guides you in thinking about the kinds of things that you will be saying to them or asking them.

Third, tell them that if they don’t respond, then you are assuming that they don’t understand. So give them a hand signal for I don’t understand. (time out, hand whooshing over the head, etc).

Now, they know that a response (verbal or physical) is ALWAYS expected of them when you are speaking in Latin to them: 1) ooh, aahh (when you tell them a fact); 2) yes/no (when you ask them a question), or 3) I don’t understand.

Remind them that you can’t try out this new method without their help, and that if they don’t cooperate, you will have to go back to normal. This should ensure that you have cooperative students, and it helps create the feeling in the room that you

are all entering into a new and exciting venture. Don't underestimate how important creating that feeling can be.

## **2. Asking simple questions in class.**

Choose 3 or 4 words/phrases to use as your target structures for the class. You could take these directly from your textbook reading, or new vocabulary to be learned. Whatever your target structures, try to stay focused on them, and avoid bringing in more or new vocab. Your goal is to introduce these structures to the class, establish meaning, and help them acquire those structures through lots of repetition, but not dull repetition.

Put the new structures on the board, with English translation. Say them in both Latin and English, taking time to point to whatever you are saying. Ask the class if they can think of a word, idea or gesture that could help the class remember the structure. Some teachers will incorporate TPR at this point, or establish a class gesture to be acted whenever they hear the word. Don't feel you have to do this unless you find it helpful. However informal you make this kind of play, it helps to establish meaning, and gives the class the repetitions they need, and all the better if they are unaware that they are "getting the reps."

Choose the first phrase and say it to the class, and make the gesture that tells them this is fascinating. Then, ask students the phrase in the form of a question which has "ita" for its answer. Then ask an either/or version. Then ask it in the form of a question which has a negative answer. Then ask in a way that students will respond with a correct word. Ask one more time the question that has "ita" for an answer, and then you finish by repeating the original statement. This is called "circling," and it allows you to repeat the word many times while retaining student engagement. Here's a quick example,

target words: canis, culina, latrat and ambulat.

Teacher: Discipuli. Canis latrat in culina

Class: ooh, aah!

T: Discipuli, canis latrat in culina?

C: ita!

T: canis latrat an ambulat?

C: latrat

T: ita, canis latrat in culina. Canis ambulat?

C: Minime

T: Canis non ambulat. Est res absurda! Canis latrat. Quid agit canis?

C: latrat!

T: Ita, canis latrat. Canis latrat?

C: Ita

T: Ita. Canis latrat in culina.

etc.

To stretch out “circling” as long as you can, try circling different parts of the sentence. For the sentence “Canis latrat in culina,” you can circle “canis,” interchanging it with different animals, students in the class or even celebrities. You then can circle the verb “latrat” interchanging it with different verbs, and circle the place “in culina,” interchanging it with different places.

### **Optional: personalizing the discussion**

If you get comfortable with this process, you might want to try changing up the sentences, such that strange scenarios could emerge from the discussion. Interest in the sentence will grow and students will focus on the meaning of the words and begin to “lose themselves” in the language, both understanding Latin and enjoying it too. For example, you might point to Brian, a student who you think will enjoy a bit of fun (this is important, so it doesn’t draw attention to him in a bad way), and suggest “Brian latrat in Starbucks,” and ask the class about this, circling the same key structures with even more enthusiasm and buy-in. This personalizes the vocabulary, and gets students even more interested in the content, and less aware of the language. Then, you can compare the two sentences, which leads to more personalization and enthusiasm. Stretching out circling will also help you get a high number of repetitions on your target structures. It is generally agreed that over 75 repetitions of a structure are necessary for it to be acquired into long term memory.

### **3. Checking for understanding.**

There are a few ways you can do this, and whatever way you choose, it is most important that you are aware when your students don’t get it. One way to check understanding is to have students, with eyes closed, hold up 1-10 fingers to show how much they understand. Another way is periodically to stop the class and say “can somebody tell me in English what I just said?” or you could ask a particular student to translate a word or phrase—only be careful so you don’t put a kid on the spot who is not entirely sure or confident. All the while, if you are really observing your students, you should be able to tell who is following you and who is beginning to check out. Most times, students “check out” because they don’t understand—though there are always exceptions.

If you know which students struggle the most, in spite of their efforts in class, your attention should be primarily on them. That student (or students) will be your gauge of how well you are making yourself comprehensible. If this student indicates that she does not understand (either by letting you know, or through your observation), you need to do more repetitions, stop and discuss in English, whatever it takes to get that student back in the loop.

### **4. Give a simple, authentic assessment**

After you have spent 1-2 class periods asking questions, checking for understanding, and are more or less sure that all of your students understand the new structures, give them a simple quiz which is based on those structures. Say you have been working with the following structures:

1. canis cibum consumit
2. latrat
3. verberat

Ask students to write numbers 1-10 on a piece of paper. On the board write the Latin words "verum" and "falsum." Have students write the entire word for each answer.

Tell the students that they must listen closely, because you will only repeat the statement twice (3x total), and you will not repeat any of the statements once the quiz is finished. In addition, any talking will result in an automatic zero. Here are some examples of quiz questions based on the structures and the questioning.

canis means cane

canis bananas consumit.

latrat means barks

canis cibum consumit

cibum means food

canis latrat (as long as you have established this in the previous classes)

Students are rewarded for having paid attention, because this quiz should be easy for them. Here are some of the benefits of this kind of assessment:

\*accurately assesses their comprehension of previous days' conversation, and tells you if you need to revisit certain structures/vocab.

\*sets students up for success

\*gives you an accurate gauge of how your class is doing, and individual student progress

\* provides another opportunity for you to deliver comprehensible input, in a situation where students are paying close attention.

\* does not take up much class time, which is better spent delivering comprehensible input.

\*requires little time to create, administer and grade (for large classes, scantron works fine)

## **5. choral translation**

Now that students have shown that they understand all new structures in a story, you can help them translate accurately in a stress-free environment.

Put the reading up on the screen/board. You should be able to point easily to each word (a laser pointer is very good for this, but you can use a ruler or your hand if the board is low enough). Tell the students "we are going to translate together,

which means that I will point at a Latin word, and you will say the English. I want you to stay with me. This means not getting ahead of me, or falling behind. Also, I want to hear that everyone is translating, but this does not mean you can yell or be too loud.”

If certain students can't do this, and cause too much distraction, simply tell that student/those students to be silent for the remainder of the exercise.

You should translate in good English word order, and jump to the right Latin word even if it is not next. Tell students that you are going to do this, and that they should do their best to follow you—going slow will really help. This is also a good opportunity to show students the difference between Latin and English word order. Students might get a kick out of translating the sentence in the literal word order (which some of us call “Yoda Speak” because the character Yoda in Star Wars would often put the verb at the end), and then comparing it to a more natural English word order.

Once you have done choral translation, students will be more prepared for more individual translation work, such as being called on to translate, or translating in pairs. It is helpful to have a ball or stuffed animal to give to the kid who is translating while it is his/her turn. This provides comfort, and makes them want to volunteer. Contrary to what some teachers may think, high school and even college level students have a lot of fun doing this.

Once students have demonstrated their understanding of the text through this activity, you could give a more traditional translation test to finish up the unit. Or, if you feel comfortable with this process, you could use the target vocabulary to ask a story. We hope to produce a larger document in the near future which will outline effective strategies for asking a story in Latin.

Please let us know how this exercise goes, and if you have any comments, revisions, etc., please send them my way at [john.piazza@yahoo.com](mailto:john.piazza@yahoo.com)