

# TCI FAQ Sheet

Here are some answers to frequently asked questions about TCI

## 1. What do TCI, TPRS, TPR, etc. stand for?

**TCI** stands for Teaching with Comprehensible Input and means just that: the teacher uses messages in the target language that learners find compelling and understandable to help them acquire the language unconsciously.

**TPRS®** stands for Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Storytelling. It is one of the best ways of providing Comprehensible Input.

**TPR®** is Total Physical Response and represents another way of providing Comprehensible Input. Don't confuse TPR and TPRS.

The rest of the alphabet soup is best learned in context.

## 2. Isn't TCI just another name for TPRS?

While TPRS is a prime example of TCI, Teaching with Comprehensible Input is more than that; it includes anything the teacher uses to make sure that the messages in the target language are both compelling and understandable to students. (The "Comprehensible" part of the name means comprehensible *to the students*, not just to the teacher.)

## 3. Speaking of "compelling", isn't this all about flying blue elephants?

While many classes enjoy the creative freedom that TCI offers and do come up with bizarre stories, "compelling" simply means that students get so involved in the **content** of the message that they forget they are speaking a foreign language. This may result in flying blue elephants, but it can equally easily result in a discussion of bullying in school, the upcoming football game, the school dance, or students' families; in other words, "compelling" means it's something the students truly want to talk about.

## 4. So what is Teaching with Comprehensible Input?

To help answer that, let's see what it is not: it is not a grammar or textbook-driven curriculum; it is not long lists of vocabulary words; it is not the teacher talking at students; it is not learning about a language; it is not immersion.

Teaching with Comprehensible Input is speaking with students in a way that every student can understand what the teacher is saying at all times; it incorporates relevance by exploring topics to which students have a connection and that relate to real life; it is student driven and student centered because students give input and direction to the flow of conversation; it goes "deep and narrow" with the language rather than "shallow and broad"; it is relational; it is aimed at acquisition of the language rather than learning about the language; it is contextualized.

**5. But what about rigor? Many students and teachers say that TCI or TPRS is “easy”.**

Teaching with Comprehensible Input, including TPRS, certainly *seems* easy to students and is very different from most of their classes. But we need to distinguish between **rigorous** and **onerous** or burdensome. Doing more work does not mean more rigor, it just means more work. Are 40 math problems that practice the same concept twice as rigorous as 20, or just more work?

According to the US Department of State, **academic rigor** includes sustained focus, depth and integrity of inquiry, suspension of premature conclusions, and continual testing of hypotheses. Students in a TCI class are exposed to this kind of rigor. The Interpersonal Mode of Communication requires them to sustain focus for the full class period with no zoning out, side conversations, etc. The student-driven nature of the course means that they can explore deeply and fully in the target language the topics that truly interest them. As students are exposed to the language in a contextualized, meaningful way, they suspend conclusions about how the language functions rather than having those conclusions forced upon them at the outset. Their unconscious mind continuously tests students’ hypotheses about what sounds correct in the language. Students are encouraged to take risks in a safe environment.

So why does it all seem so easy? Imagine you have a travel trailer that you want to take on vacation. Since all you have is a small four-cylinder car, you hitch the trailer to it and take off. Your car will strain to pull it and probably break down as a result. Your neighbor comes along with his large V-8 pickup truck; you hitch the travel trailer to the pickup and take off. No strain; the pickup handles the load with ease. What’s the difference? Did your travel trailer suddenly become lighter? Is the workload any easier? No. You simply got the right equipment for the job. That’s the difference between learning a language and acquiring a language. Learning accesses the conscious mind, which is not designed for long-term acquisition of language. TCI uses the unconscious mind, which is powerfully designed to acquire languages. Learning or acquiring a language (whichever one you want to call it) is hard work, always has been, and always will be. It just seems easy when you use the right equipment.

**6. OK; What was this about the “Interpersonal Mode of Communication”? What about the skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, and culture?**

The newest state World Language standards, the National Standards, ACTFL (American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages) and the College Board (AP courses / exams) all revolve around the Three Modes of Communication: Interpersonal, Interpretive and Presentational. Since the purpose of language is to communicate, this emphasis is correct. Presentational communication is when the “author” speaks or writes without the opportunity to interact with the audience and so must think in advance about how to present compellingly

and understandably. Interpretive communication is when the recipient reads, hears, or sees a “text” without the author’s being present. The text must be understood without direct help from the author. Interpersonal communication is when two or more people exchange information and language with each other and have the opportunity to clarify, negotiate meaning, express lack of understanding, etc. This is really the core of both language acquisition and Teaching with Comprehensible Input. Real-life communication and TCI incorporate all six of those skills in a holistic and organic way, rather than as a laboratory sample to be dissected.

### **7. That all sounds interesting, but can you back it up?**

Good question. We should always be able to give a reason for what we do. Second Language Acquisition researchers disagree on many points, but the one thing that they all agree on is this: *The single most important element in language acquisition is comprehensible input.* As Wynne Wong from Ohio State University puts it: “A flood of input must precede a trickle of output.” TCI and TPRS are built around this one indisputable principle.

In addition, brain-based research indicates that the brain requires certain things; among these are meaning, repetition and novelty, and safety. We can see these at work in all sorts of ways. The need for meaning is why we see shapes in clouds, the face of a person on a tortilla, etc. Children exhibit the need for repetition when they watch the same film or read the same book over and over. The novelty aspect comes out when we remember that unusual event on our routine drive to work. How many times do you get there without remember how you did it? But see a plane land on the freeway, and you will remember it because it was novel. There is a lot more at work here, including personalization, chunking and automaticity, but that is for another discussion.

### **8. What does a TCI classroom look like, then?**

As with any method, strategy or approach, TCI looks a little different for each teacher. Some common things to look for include: the teacher speaks and encourages the students to speak the target language at least 90% of the time or more; the teacher and students engage in a conversation or dialogue in the target language; the teacher checks for comprehension regularly and often; the teacher encourages but does not force students to express their ideas in the target language at all times; the teacher shelters vocabulary but not grammar; grammar is contextualized and embedded in the language; the teacher explores topics and items that interest students as shown by their responses, reactions, and requests; the teacher incorporates rigor in the class; the teacher and students develop a relationship with one another; the teacher scaffolds instruction according to student needs.

You won’t see lots of worksheets, homework, and mind-numbing drills.

**9. What about the Common Core State Standards?**

Currently the CCSS have been developed only for English Language Arts and Math. These concepts should be addressed across the curriculum. One of the emphases in Common Core is depth of inquiry; as mentioned in the response about rigor, Teaching with Comprehensible Input uses depth and integrity of inquiry in a way that the rote memorization of grammar rules does not. TCI not only aligns very well with the goals and aims of the Common Core State Standards, it even exceeds them.

**10. Shouldn't students be reading authentic non-fiction texts?**

Of course they should, but texts need to be geared to the stage of acquisition. This is not a question for a TCI classroom alone but for every classroom. Just as English Language Learners need sheltered instruction in which the new language is adapted to their stage of acquisition, foreign language learners also need sheltered, structured, and scaffolded instruction in their new language, especially at the Novice levels (at least years one and two of a four-year high school sequence). Teachers who have training in sheltered instruction strategies (e.g. SDAIE: Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English) will recognize many TCI strategies as the ones they encountered in learning to modify instruction for English Language Learners. That's because language acquisition follows the same course no matter the language. Additionally, the scope and sequence of a TCI curriculum moves into the more challenging material as students acquire more language. We don't ask four-year-old children to read *The Wall Street Journal* in their native language; why would we place a similar burden on a second language learner?

**11. Just how long does this take? Will a student be fluent in two years?**

This is another great question. According to the Foreign Service Institute, the agency that runs the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California, their students take varying amounts of time to achieve "General Professional Proficiency", depending on how "easy" the new language is for English speakers. For the "easiest" languages (e.g. Spanish, French, Italian), the FSI states that it takes 600 class hours. With the addition of independent study, this number rises to 1,020 contact hours with the language. Most high school foreign language students have a maximum of 150 contact hours per year with their language if it is not a heritage language. In four years they will have perhaps 600 contact hours under "ideal" conditions.

The typical FSI student is mature (almost 40 years old), has an aptitude for language study (as shown by testing), already knows at least two languages, is focused, has few distractions, and is motivated\*. High school students are far from this ideal, and so is their setting. The College Board expects students who take the AP exam to have had at least eight (8) years of instruction. Malcolm Gladwell (*Outliers*) suggests 10,000 as the actual number of hours to achieve true mastery in any endeavor.

\*cf. *Draft Foreign Language Content Standards for California Public Schools Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*, p. 2. California Department of Education, 2008.