BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Kuo Zhang (University of Georgia)

With its emphasis on developing fluency, Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) is a comprehensible input-based pedagogical approach to help students learn a foreign language in classroom settings. As a “grassroots movement” built from, by, and for teachers, TPRS was originally developed by Blaine Ray, a high school Spanish teacher in California in the 1980s and /90s, and is gaining great recognition and use among world language teachers throughout the U.S. and worldwide. However, publications on TPRS techniques and teacher training are quite limited, especially in the area of less commonly taught languages. From the perspective of an experienced high school Chinese teacher, Waltz’s book fills this gap and contains practical and classroom-tested ideas to world language teachers who may have heard about TPRS and decided to give it a try in a U.S. classroom. Furthermore, Waltz provides a clear and comprehensive description of TPRS, and addresses the aspects that make Chinese unique and difficult for English speaking learners, particularly emphasizing the teaching of tones and Chinese literacy. While chapters 1–3 and 7–9 provide general introduction and practical techniques applicable to a wider audience in world language education, chapters 4–6 delves into teaching Chinese reading, writing and tones in particular.

The first chapter gives an introduction of the purpose of the book to provide teachers practical choices. The core concept here, and throughout the whole book, is how “TPRS is centered around providing comprehensible input to students in speech and writing, and in personalizing or customizing that input so that students acquire without realizing it” (p. 8). The three most important elements in this core concept are *comprehensible input*, *personalization/customization*, and *language acquisition* (subconscious and natural acquisition of a language akin to first language) instead of learning (consciously and purposefully learn a language). Based on these beliefs, Waltz emphasizes that it is always the teacher’s responsibility to provide enough comprehensible input in order to best scaffold the students’ learning.

Chapter 2 further introduces the characteristics and advantages of TPRS through analyzing the limitations found in other pedagogies, such as traditional
teaching and task-based teaching. Waltz points out that the promising result of two years intensive TPRS-taught students can be like “a small native speaker” who can “deal with many more unknowns and soak up new vocabulary nearly as rapidly as a native speaker” (p. 17). She emphasizes comprehensible input is exclusively capable to result in acquisition, while other factors can only influence acquisition. For Waltz this is an all or nothing approach. She further cautions language teachers that half-TPRS and half other methods doesn’t work well and may result in students not acquiring well nor testing well. In addition, Waltz analyzes the differences and respective advantages of personalization (using actual information about the students) and customization (using information about people or things the students are interested in). While personalization better helps capture student attention, she warns it also can be problematic under school policies about some “inappropriate” topics. In contrast, customization involves the discussion of external things that students like (or don’t like), such as cartoons and superstars, instead of students themselves. The choice between personalization and customization or a mixture of them highly depends on specific context for different teachers.

Chapter 3 focuses on specific TPRS techniques in teaching listening and speaking. Built on many detailed explanations and concrete examples, Waltz highlights how TPRS is centered around story-asking instead of storytelling, which also serves as a strong argument against the claim that TPRS is overly teacher-centric. A vivid simile is used to illustrate the roles teacher and students act in story-asking. While the teacher prepares a “skeleton” or outline of the action of a story to fulfill the linguistic objectives, the students can put any “meat on the bones” to have a better ownership of the story. Moreover, Waltz also emphasizes the importance of 100% comprehension among all the students during a TPRS class, which means all the students are understanding what the teacher is saying all the time. In order to achieve this goal, many practical and useful techniques are introduced, such as establishing meaning, slowing down, pointing, repetition, circling, comprehension check, limiting vocabulary, directional gestures, drawing, recaps, pop-ups etc. Waltz views TPRS as teaching students, not teaching a textbook. Therefore, it becomes easier for the teachers to notice individual differences and have the flexibility to handle them quickly, such as providing differentiated support to best ensure their comprehension.

Chapters 4–5 delve into the techniques in teaching literacy: reading and writing. In the area of teaching reading, Waltz introduces a method named cold-character reading (CCR), which relies on extensive Chinese reading to help beginners to read in Chinese in an easy and direct way. The prerequisite of CCR is that the students have already orally acquired the language that will be in the reading. The texts used for cold-character reading are purpose-written texts with zero unknown words for the students. For example, the text can be 400+ words long,
but only contain 29 unique characters. Therefore, the main purpose of CCR is to help the students recognize and become familiar with Chinese characters through high levels of repetition, which resembles the process of Chinese native speaking children acquiring characters. With regard to teaching writing, Waltz divides writing into two categories: compositional writing (in the sense of composing a message) and mechanical writing (the skill of forming characters using any means available). Waltz makes an argument that although there are good reasons to have students learn how to write Chinese characters by hand, she argues teaching mechanical writing cannot make people remember things better, and even Chinese native speakers do not have that many opportunities to write Chinese characters. Therefore, Waltz encourages the mechanical writing education to focus on helping students recognize the characters and able to type, rather than draw Chinese characters correctly. In compositional writing, the goal is to “link the written and spoken languages”. In other words, if the students show some difficulty in writing, it’s time to look back and think about the problems of input instead of the written output. An important concept Waltz proposed here is the “Chinese voice” in a student’s head, which could “tell him what word probably comes next, or warn him that a word he has guessed cannot be correct because it doesn’t ‘sound right’ or make sense” (p. 119).

Chapters 6–7 are relatively short and respectively provide more details to introduce the techniques of teaching tones, and structures and grammar. Waltz particularly demonstrates how she uses directional gestures as a powerful tool to assist the teaching of tones. Directional gestures use multiple modalities to build the connection among visual gesture, word meanings and tones. Specifically, the four tones of Chinese are represented using the different space around the body. For example, first tone is always gestured at chin level or higher no matter what the gesture looks like, and third tone remains at waist level or below. In this way, the students can embodied acquire the tones instead of rote learning. With regard to teaching structures and grammar, Waltz adopts a pragmatic approach in her TPRS teaching that grammar is always linked to meaning, which means that “when we teach grammar, what we are really teaching is which part of the message carries what meaning” (p. 157) rather than focusing on “the form of the words, what order they go on, or what is added” (p. 70). Therefore, TPRS relies on pop-ups and freebies (words, most common grammar and set phrases posting on the wall for teacher to frequently point as they are used during the class instead of directly teaching the form) to help internalize the meaning in the context. Waltz calls this “passive grammar instruction” (p. 156) instead of formal grammar instruction.

Chapters 8–9 present some strategies and resources for teachers to learn to teach with TPRS and also provide very brief theoretical foundation by Stephen Krashen. Some suggestions for teachers are to attend TPRS workshops and
gradually implement TPRS in one class and then apply it in more classes and different levels. Since the target readers of this book are teachers instead of researchers, the introduction of theory in this book is quite general and simple, mentioning only Krashen’s (1982) comprehension hypothesis and some now dated methods consistent with the hypothesis, such as Asher’s TPR (1977), and Krashen and Terrell’s Natural Approach (1983).

This book has both strengths and weakness that should be noted. One weakness is that this book doesn’t offer enough consideration and facilitation to appeal to a wide audience, although it claims to address second language teachers in general. It only focuses on teaching beginners and intermediate students using TPRS without demonstrating how advanced learners could benefit. In addition, the target students in this book are apparently American high school (and middle school) students and the context of teaching is assumed to be in the U. S. It fails to address culture-specific issues and student diversity. In addition, in some places in the book, Waltz chooses to directly use Chinese characters (or pinyin) without English translation. While the readers might be able to guess the possible meaning according to the context, it indeed causes some confusion among readers who do not know Chinese. Another weakness is that Waltz tends to make claims about TPRS without showing any data as evidence. Furthermore, she tries to evaluate other teaching methods and make her judgment based on what TPRS and comprehensible input hypothesis values. It weakens her argument to put a prerequisite that comprehensive input is the only important aspect in acquiring a foreign language.

Apart from the weakness noted above, Waltz does a wonderful job introducing what TPRS is and how specifically a teacher can conduct a TPRS class. She does not claim that her methods and techniques are the only way that TPRS teachers should follow; rather, she is careful to insist that the core concept is to provide enough comprehensible input through personalization/customization, whereas everything else is the teacher’s choice. In addition, Waltz provides many critical and constructive discussions on some difficult and/or controversial issues such as how to face the administrative challenges outside the TPRS classroom, the choices between teaching simplified and traditional Chinese characters, the practices of mechanical writing and tone practices, etc. To teachers who are interested in TPRS, pedagogical research and teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages, I highly recommend this book. It is extremely practical and thought-provoking, and guides readers to open their eyes and have an authentic taste of how TPRS works.
References


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