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An Interactive Storytelling Puzzle: Building a Positive Environment in a Second Language Classroom

Lisa M. Roof and Cheryl A. Kreutter

Abstract

The Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) method promised superior results in a second language classroom. However, experiences using the method in a middle school Spanish classroom were not always positive. Classroom structure dissolved during the interactive storytelling sessions when students' disruptive responses overshadowed the benefits of the teaching method. This paper describes an action research project designed to analyze student engagement during two different TPRS lessons. In the first lesson, the classroom teacher followed the TPRS procedures with no modifications. In the second lesson, the teacher revised the lesson procedures by (a) explicitly stating clear expectations and giving the students a concrete measurement of expectations, (b) providing an added visual element, and (c) giving the students opportunities to respond chorally during the storytelling. Students were more positively engaged for the second lesson as evidenced by their active response to the story in the target language. Results suggest that, along with providing clear expectations for the students' role during the lesson, adding strong classroom management, story-related props and choral response are useful ways to support student learning using TPRS in a second language classroom.

The Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) method promised superior results in a second language classroom. However, experiences using the method in a middle school Spanish classroom were not always positive. Classroom structure dissolved during the interactive storytelling sessions when students' disruptive responses overshadowed the benefits of the teaching method. Through Lisa's writer voice, we tell the story of an action research project designed to investigate how modifications to a TPRS lesson might assist students in becoming more engaged and less disruptive.

Lisa's Story

When I was a small child, I attempted a difficult jigsaw puzzle. However, I did not want to spend my time with the mundane

outer edges. I was drawn to the colors and shapes that were elsewhere within the puzzle. Unfortunately, the difficult task eventually eroded my enthusiasm and I gave it up altogether.

Similarly to working with that first jigsaw puzzle, I found using the Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) method to be overwhelming. When I first read articles about the method, it resonated with my linguistic and literacy training. As a Spanish teacher at a rural middle school, I saw the glazed expression on my students' faces whenever I introduced a new grammar concept. I knew through my undergraduate linguistic training that introducing rules and teaching vocabulary out of context was not the way that children acquired their first language—so why did I expect it to be

successful in teaching a second language? I also learned, through my graduate literacy studies, the importance of context in teaching a child to read. Context seemed equally important in teaching children how to understand vocabulary in a new language.

The TPRS method offered promise as an innovative and exciting way to teach Spanish to my students in a contextualized manner that mirrored my students' acquisition of their first language. I was drawn to pieces of the method in the same way as I had been drawn to the different colors and shapes in the jigsaw puzzle; but as I attempted to use aspects of TPRS instruction in my classroom, my enthusiasm faded. During the interactive, storytelling format of the method, students became disruptive and distracted, causing the structured atmosphere of my classroom to break down. Surprisingly, the students usually were not disruptive because of boredom or lack of engagement, but because they became absorbed in the story to the point that they strayed from the Spanish narrative and many of them, consequently, talked out of turn. The TPRS picture in my classroom did not look like the promising picture on the box of the "TPRS jigsaw puzzle"—it was just a pile of unconnected pieces.

To address my concerns about this breakdown in classroom structure during the TPRS instruction, I developed an action research project that focused on modifying the TPRS method in ways that kept students engaged within a well-managed classroom. I conducted the research in my combined 7th and 8th grade Spanish class in a rural school district in Western New York where I have taught for three years. My colleague, (second author) provided guidance as I developed the study and remained a critical friend throughout the data collection process and initial analysis of the findings. Cheryl actively participated in analyzing the final study results and co-authoring this article.

Two key questions guided my research:

In teaching a TPRS lesson, how can I actively involve students, yet still

maintain positive classroom management so that the students are engaged in learning?

What factors are affecting my negative perception of the lessons, and how can I improve my technique so that I feel comfortable with the results?

This paper is my development of the framework involving the puzzle of TPRS. By focusing on the outer structure, I made room to create the entire picture successfully. In the following pages, I first explain the Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) method. Second, I explore recent research on classroom management and its role in student achievement. After laying the foundation for this study, I describe the participants, research methods, and findings. Finally, I discuss the conclusions I reached about the effectiveness of the intervention and suggest areas for future research.

The Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) Teaching Method

The TPRS teaching method originates from a kinesthetic instructional approach entitled, "Total Physical Response" (TPR). In the 1960s and 1970s, Dr. James Asher introduced the method, in which students physically responded to various commands in the target language (Davidheiser, 2002). The instructor began by demonstrating simple commands, such as "sit down" and "stand up" in the target language. Through practice and repetition, the students learn to respond to the teacher's commands. The teacher gradually builds on the students' growing repertoire of words until students can respond to complex directions (e.g. "Stand up, turn around three times, walk to the whiteboard, and write your name with a marker.") (Asher, 2000).

Blaine Ray expanded this method in the 1990s to include simple stories created in the target language that used TPR commands as the foundation and added details to further students' language experience. His method,

Figure 1. A Sample TPRS Lesson (format was adapted from Ray & Seely (1998).

canta fuerte – he/she sings loudly

baila – he/she dances

está enojada(a) – he/she is angry

se ríen – they laugh

Step 1 – Gesture – The phrases above are written on the board in English and Spanish. Students invent a gesture to coincide with each word or phrase (e.g., for “baila,” students mime dancing). The students mime the actions when the teacher says the words in Spanish. This is practiced until the students can mime the actions easily without referring to what the words mean in English.

Step 2 – Personalized Questions and Answers – Students are asked questions based on the above words to begin to personalize the vocabulary. The questions are asked in Spanish: Who sings? Do you sing loudly or softly? Who sings like Hannah Montana? Who sings like Elvis? Do you sing romantically? What do you sing? Do you sing at home, in the car, or at school? Where do you sing?

Step 3 – Story – Using the answers to the question from the previous step, the teacher creates a personalized story about the students in the classroom. The following is a framework for a basic short story.

Federico es estudiante. Federico canta fuerte en la clase de matemáticas. Canta y baila en el pupitre. La profesora está enojada. Los estudiantes se ríen.

Translation: Fred is a student. Fred sings loudly in math class. He sings and dances on the desk. The teacher is angry. The students laugh.

Step 4 – Dramatize – Using students as actors, the instructor retells the story and has the students act it out.

called “TPRS,” was the basis of my lesson plans (Ray & Seely, 1998).

TPRS begins with “comprehensible input,” which are phrases in the target language that the teacher translates for the students into their native tongue. In a TPRS lesson, the teacher often begins with four phrases written in both English and Spanish on the classroom whiteboard (see Figure 1). First, the instructor displays the phrases on the board and teaches a gesture to go along with each phrase. The students perform the action as the teacher says the new phrases. Next, the teacher asks questions that refer to the phrases. For example, if a phrase is “El chico canta,” (“the boy sings”) the teacher might

ask, “Canta el chico como Elvis o Hannah Montana?” (“Does the boy sing like Elvis or Hannah Montana?”). The students answer and the teacher continues to ask more questions in the target language based on the phrase (e.g., “Do you like to sing?” “Who likes to sing?” “How does the boy sing?”). In this way, the students hear the target word (“sing”) many times. The answers that the students give to the various questions, as well as the key phrases introduced at the beginning of class, form the structure of the story that the instructor proceeds to tell (Ray & Seely, 1998). Through this method, the teacher creates a personalized story that integrates the new vocabulary. Then the students act out the story, further reinforcing

the vocabulary and creating an interactive learning situation. An example of a TPRS lesson is shown in Figure 1.

Studies comparing TPR and TPRS methods with traditional teaching methods have shown that students scored significantly higher on vocabulary retention tests when the TPR or TPRS methods were used (Davidheiser, 2002; Kariuki & Bush, 2008). These studies not only reported the methods were effective as measured by test scores, but also the students stated that they enjoyed learning with the TPR and TPRS approach (Davidheiser, 2002; Skala, 2003).

However, even proponents of this method delineated various drawbacks. Skala (2003) discussed the complexity of using the TPRS method. She seemed surprised at the students' positive reaction to the method in her study, despite what she considered the "awkwardness" in teaching the material. Catania (2007), another promoter of the TPRS method, created a curriculum of stories to use in the TPRS classroom. One of the purposes of creating the curriculum was to help bring structure to the method. In the forward of her book, she noted that the TPRS classroom can become "rather chaotic" (Catania, 2007, p 3). Thus, despite students' positive reception of TPRS, teachers sometimes may abandon it due to its complexity and lack of structure. A teacher may be concerned about sacrificing student behavior expectations and classroom organization to implement this teaching method.

Classroom Management

Teachers' concerns about classroom management seem merited in light of the research of the characteristics of highly effective teachers. Parris and Block (2007) surveyed 70 literacy teacher supervisors representing all 50 states in the United States. The supervisors were asked to identify the characteristics of highly effective literacy teachers. Even though this survey specifically concerned literacy teachers, I believe it can be generalized to apply to many types of

teachers. Researchers separated the survey responses into eight different categories to define a highly effective literacy teacher. "Superior classroom management" was a characteristic common to all of these teachers. One indication of this quality was "excellent learning management (ability to keep students focused on work, minimal discipline problems)" (Parris & Block, 2007, p. 588). I concluded that if students were not able to stay focused on the lesson because they are distracted by the method, then the method was ineffective.

For this study, I needed to evaluate the behavior-management issues and improve the classroom atmosphere in order to effectively use TPRS. In trying to define the problems in the class, I examined behavior methods in the classroom context. Simonsen et al (2008) explored effective classroom management procedures and developed a checklist of management areas to evaluate five categories of strategies: a) structure and predictability, b) positively stated expectations, c) actively engaged students, d) continuum of strategies to acknowledge appropriate behavior, and e) a continuum of strategies to respond to inappropriate behavior. I used this checklist to guide my observation of students during TPRS lessons (See Appendix B).

Other research supports a focus on these five classroom management areas. For example, a study by Lohrmann and Talerico (2004) demonstrated a positive correlation between explicit expectations and student behavior. When the instructor gave ten students with learning disabilities structured and predictable guidelines for behavior and the guidelines were monitored and reinforced, the students' behavior improved. Johnson, Stoner, and Green (1996) further supported this approach. These researchers observed twenty-five 7th grade students across five classrooms. They found that three behavioral interventions were most effective in decreasing behavior problems: directly stating the rules, monitoring expectations, and reinforcing the rules.

In seeking ways to increase opportunities for active student engagement, Christle and Schuster (2003) studied a fourth- grade math class where students were given a response card (a whiteboard) for some lessons and were asked one-on-one questions about other similar lessons. Using the whiteboards created the expectation that all students would respond to the teacher's questions, rather than allowing one student to respond. Study results indicated that when the teacher gave students more opportunities to respond during the lesson, the students' time-on-task, positive behavior, and achievement increased. Similarly, in a classroom for students with emotional behavior disorders, researchers gave the students increased response opportunities and they found that behavior problems decreased as students responded more to the teacher's questions (Sutherland, Alder, & Gunter, 2003).

This research suggests there is a correlation between some classroom-management strategies, student engagement, and achievement. Giving students clear expectations and modeling and reinforcing these expectations may effectively influence behavior in the classroom. Also, by providing students with ample opportunities to respond to the lesson, an instructor may positively impact student engagement and lesson effectiveness. In light of these research results, I used Simonsen et al's checklist to evaluate my classroom- management strengths and weaknesses during the study (See Appendix C).

The Research Project

Participants and Setting

The students in this study were 7th and 8th graders in a rural school district in Western New York. I observed a classroom of fifteen students. Thirteen students were 7th graders and two students were 8th graders. I focused on seven students because these students attended all three of the observation sessions and were able to be observed during each session (i.e., the view of the students was not obstructed on the video by other students or desks). This was their first year learning

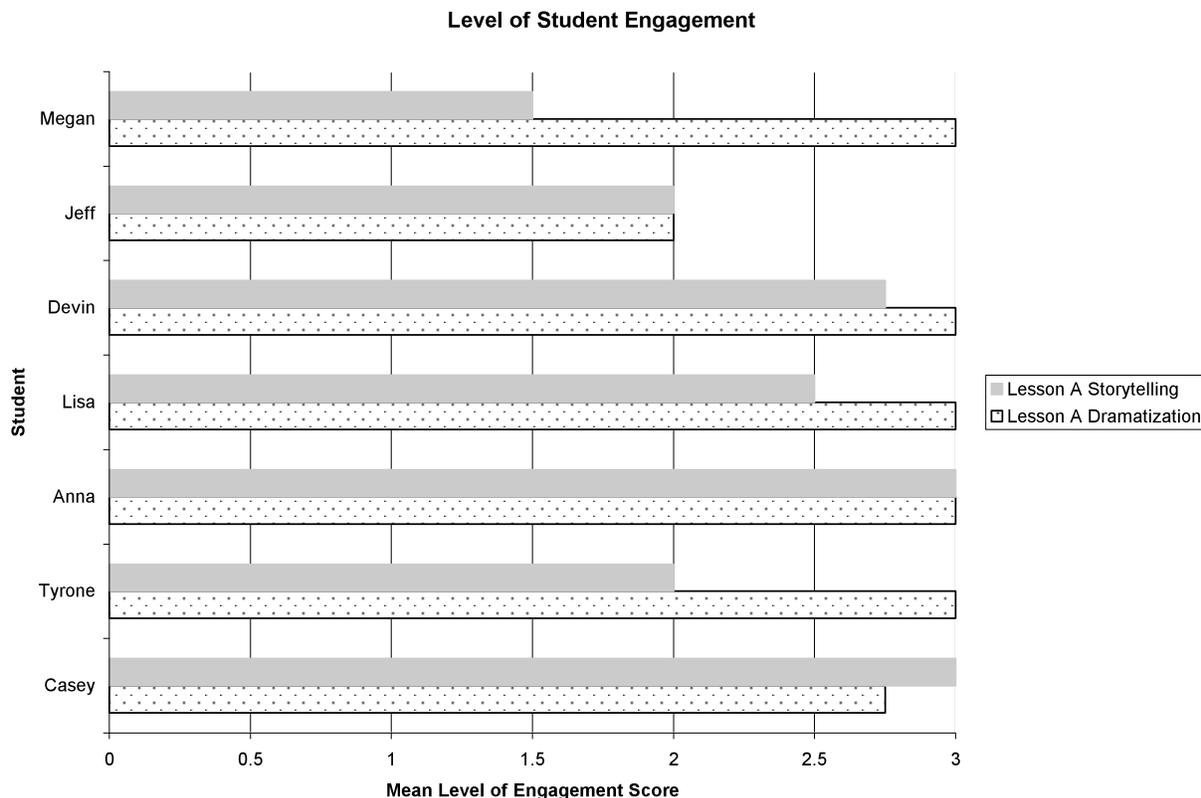
Spanish. The Spanish class met daily for forty minutes. Pseudonyms are used for all of the participants in this study.

Research Design

I videotaped two lessons. Lesson A was recorded as a baseline lesson to observe the effectiveness of the method without any modifications. After observing the lesson, I determined what changes needed to be made and used the "Classroom Assessment Checklist" (Simonsen et al., 2008) to identify factors that may have affected students' behavior (Appendixes B & C). I also categorized the sections of the lessons and noted my thoughts as I watched the video (Appendixes D & E). I then filmed Lesson B, a second lesson in which I had changed the lesson based on my observation of the first lesson. Due to time constraints, the second lesson was split into two different class periods. After both lessons, I coded the behavior of the seven students who attended all three sessions and who were easily visible on the videotape. Their behavior was recorded on a scale of 0-3 in one-minute intervals. A score of "3" denoted - "strongly engaged" behavior (student seemed engaged and was looking at the teacher or lesson presentation and responding to teacher prompts); "2" represented a student who was looking away from the presentation, but still seem engaged in the lesson (responds to teacher prompts or makes comments that indicate some level attentiveness); and a "1" indicated the student was being disruptive in ways that inhibited learning. Such behaviors included talking or visually distracting other students. Because of the variance in Lessons A and B, I used the sections of the two lessons that were the same. For both lessons, I coded the behavior for the first five minutes of the storytelling section of the lesson and for the first five minutes of the dramatization time of the lesson (See Appendix A).

The storytelling section of the lessons, as well as the dramatization, were based on the TPRS lesson structure as shown in Figure 1. The TPRS stories I used for the lesson were included as part of the first- year Spanish

Figure 2: Level of Student Engagement, Lesson A.



curriculum, *En Español*, (Gahala, Carlin, Heining-Boynton, Otheguy, Rupert, 2004). The stories, written by Fritze (n.d.), coincided with the vocabulary of Unit Two, Lesson Three in the textbook. Both stories, with translations, are included in the appendixes (Appendixes F and G). As I read the story to the students, I asked questions to clarify meaning and check the students’ comprehension level. Then, I called on students to act out the story and read the story again as the students dramatized the action.

Figure 2 shows the level of engagement of seven students in the classroom during the baseline lesson. The mean value of engaged behavior for all seven students during the storytelling time was 2.4. During the dramatization, the mean was 2.8. Megan had the lowest engagement score (1.5) for the storytelling portion of the lesson. Jeff’s score was consistently lower than the mean (2) for both the storytelling and dramatization.

Baseline Observations

Based on my observation of the video, I answered ten out of thirteen questions on the “Classroom Assessment Checklist” (Simonsen et al., 2008) in the affirmative, confirming that those classroom- management strategies were present in my classroom. I answered “no” to three out of the thirteen questions. All three questions related to expectations. Upon reflection I recognized that I did not clearly state my expectations for the storytelling and dramatization. I also did not monitor or reinforce the expectations. A copy of the Lesson A Classroom Assessment Checklist is included in the appendixes (Appendix B).

While observing the baseline lesson, I noticed that students made at least twenty-seven comments in English during the first telling of the story. Students did not make any comments in Spanish. I also noticed that the students seemed to lose focus whenever I looked down to reference the text as I was

reading the story. A complete list of these general observations is included in the appendixes (Appendixes D and E).

What We Learned

Discussion of Lesson A

I was surprised at how engaged students were during the baseline lesson. Even without modifications, TPRS seems to be a lesson technique that holds students' attention. The primary exceptions to engaged behavior were Megan and Jeff.

At the end of lesson A, which focused on the story of a girl misbehaving in Spanish class, I asked the students some more questions about the story to check comprehension. Jeff and I had the following conversation:

Me: Jeff, ¿Está en la clase de matemáticas o la clase de español? (Is she in math class or Spanish class?)

Jeff: (scribbling in his notebook) I'm trying to figure out what the "aspieces" or whatever is. (I think this is his interpretation of "matemáticas")

(I repeat the question more slowly.)

Jeff: (whispers to students) What does that mean?

Jeff's comments at the end of the baseline lesson revealed the cause of his inattention during the lesson. When I asked him a question about the lesson, he had difficulty understanding the vocabulary used in my question. In successfully employing the TPRS method, it is important to conduct frequent comprehension checks to be sure that students like Jeff are receiving comprehensible input. I believe that Jeff stopped paying attention because he did not understand the story.

I suspect that Megan did not pay attention for different reasons. Megan became fascinated with the dynamics of a piece of string throughout the storytelling time of the lesson and talked to other classmates during the storytelling session. However, she was much more attentive when students were acting out

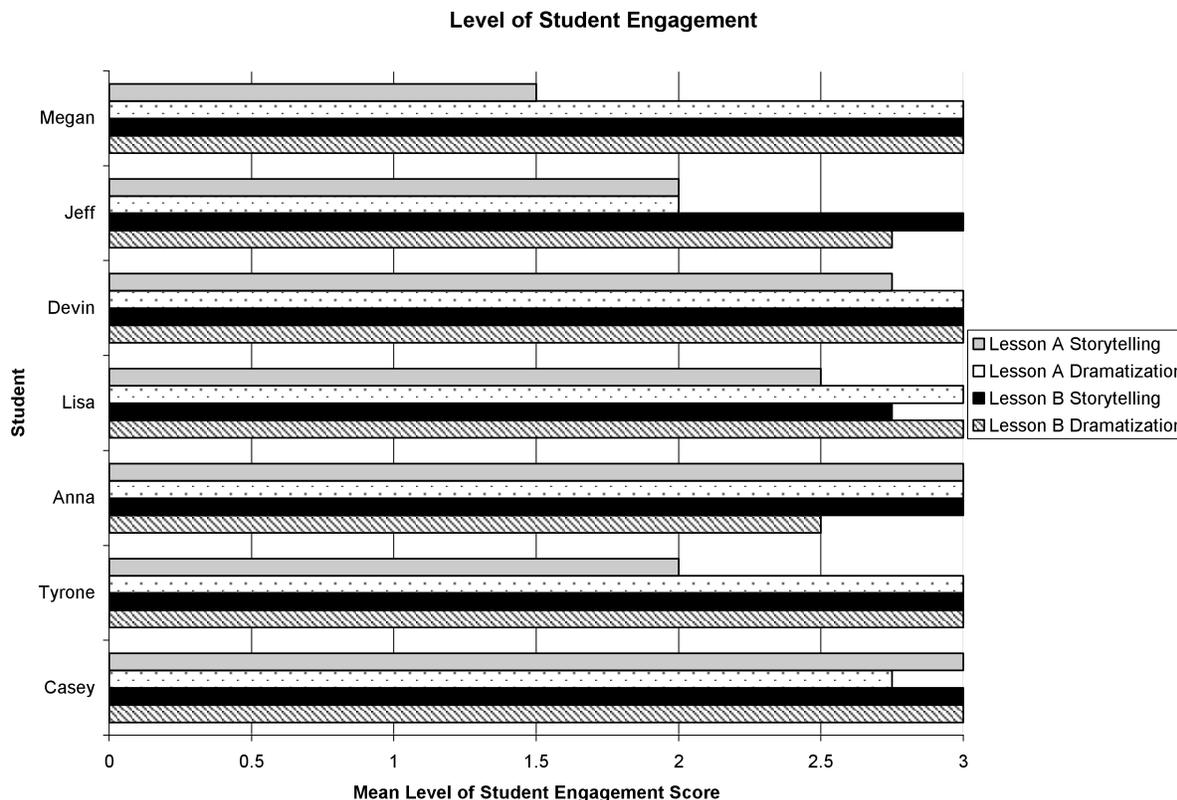
the story. I suspect that Megan is a visual learner. Without pictures or a drama to focus her attention, she created her own visual stimulus during the storytelling. This was confirmed by the complete attention she showed to the dramatization of the story.

Tyrone and Lisa also received somewhat lower scores for engagement level. Lisa frequently looked down at her desk, although she appeared to be listening throughout the lesson. Tyrone was listening, because he interrupted the lesson to ask a question in English about a minor point in the story. Although this was distracting for me and probably some other students in the class, it actually confirmed his attentiveness.

My frustration with the TPRS method originated from two factors that were present in the baseline lesson: (a) students made many comments in English during the storytelling time, and (b) I was dependent upon the text to tell the story, and I had to refer to it many times. The comments in English were quick and short; however, I believe that these comments were related to my negative feelings toward the TPRS lessons. Like a buzzing mosquito, these constant distractions inhibited a clear and focused lesson. This was clearly a missing edge piece to the puzzle. My dependency upon the text also diverted the lesson focus. At first, I was unsure how I could resolve the problem, but using pictures not only helped me to become less dependent upon the text, but it also supported student attentiveness. The pieces were falling into place.

Modifications. Based on these results, I decided to modify the next lesson - Lesson B. First, I realized that I needed to provide clear expectations for the TPRS lesson. At the beginning of Lesson B, I explained that students were not allowed to respond in English, but could only respond to the story in Spanish. To monitor this expectation, I gave one student a whiteboard divided into two sections. Her role was to record every time a student responded in English and every time a student responded in Spanish. I rewarded

Figure 3. Level of Student Engagement, Lessons A and B.



the students with an extra “chili-pepper point” (my method of positive behavior reinforcement) if they were able to respond primarily in Spanish.

In order to facilitate the students’ ability to respond in Spanish, I provided them with three phrases that they could use throughout the story (¡Qué cómico!- That’s funny!; ¡No me digas! - You’re kidding!, and ¡Qué lástima! - That’s too bad!). One student held up the sign with the phrase he chose at various points in the story. The students responded by stating each phrase. This provided students with a positive behavior to replace their previous behavior of yelling out comments in English that increased the opportunities for students to respond.

The other way I modified the lesson was to use eight pictures to illustrate the story. I projected the pictures on the overhead for the students to see during the initial storytelling

time. The pictures are included in Appendix H.

As shown in Figure 3, the amount of average student engagement either increased or remained the same for the seven students observed. The mean engagement behavior for all seven students was 2.9 out of 3 for the storytelling portion of Lesson B and 2.9 out of 3 for the dramatization.

Observations. For the second lesson, I answered “yes” to all thirteen areas included on the Classroom Assessment Checklist (Simonsen et al., 2008). During the second lesson, students made thirteen comments in Spanish and two in English during the storytelling time. I saw no incidences of off-task behavior while I told the story. While I reviewed the story, four students seemed slightly distracted, but they did not disrupt other students, and their inattentiveness was brief. Jeff fidgeted during the lesson and put his head down on his desk, but he did not

disrupt other students, and he was engaged during most of the lesson. Megan helped to direct the other students during the dramatization. She mimed eating to help the actor remember that he was supposed to eat a pork rind.

Reflections on Lesson B. Using pictures was effective in keeping students engaged during the storytelling time. Both Megan's and Jeff's level of engagement scores improved. I argue that the pictures aided both learners. Jeff was able to understand the story better through the illustrations, and Megan was able to remain attentive.

I felt more comfortable delivering the second lesson. In delineating expectations for the students, I was less distracted in telling the story because students were not making comments in English. Instead, they were responding chorally in Spanish. Secondly, by providing pictures to illustrate the storytelling time, I was able to tell the story without referring to the text. The pictures helped me to maintain more eye contact with students and to be able to monitor students' responses to the story, instead of having to continue to reference the text. These factors were definitely "edge pieces" in the TPRS jigsaw.

Conclusions

The observations that I made in the preliminary lesson motivated me to make focused changes in the second lesson. Through explicitly stating expectations, using drawings to illustrate the story, and by providing opportunities for choral responses, I was able to fit many pieces of the TPRS jigsaw together. These modifications gave students opportunities for active involvement, yet still enabled me to maintain positive classroom management.

I will continue to place the edges and corners of the TPRS method in my classroom; with the modifications I developed to help guide this process. Still, there are some colorful jigsaw pieces in the box that catch my eye. These considerations for further research would be the affective component of the lessons. The humor in the first story seemed

to have a strong effect on the students' positive feelings about the lesson. Does this humor also affect the students' vocabulary retention and motivation to learn? Another factor of the TPRS lesson is the personalized question and answer time. How can this part of the lesson be used to best aid comprehension? Although there are still many more details about the teaching method that I need to master, I feel that I have built a framework for future success with storytelling in my classroom.

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