# Teaching a Beginning French Course Through Two Different Methods

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**Abstract**

This study was designed to investigate the effects of two teaching methods: Total Physical Response (TPR), and Strategic Interaction (SI) on students' performance when acquiring French. Forty beginning French learners at the Balamand University in Lebanon were in two classes using different instructional methods. After a period of fourteen weeks, learning was assessed in two aspects: acquisition of the target language code, and interactional skills. The two language aspects were measured through four tests: the ACTFL/ETS oral interview test, the cloze test, a dictation, and a discrete-point grammar test. At the conclusion of the study, results showed that the SI group maintained stronger correlations among the four measures than did the TPR group. The SI students exhibited significant superiority over the TPR group in the oral measure at the 001 level. The SI students were able to develop two underlying competencies: interactional and linguistic, whereas the TPR learners developed only a linguistic competence. The study provides further empirical evidence to support the claim that language proficiency stems from more than a single underlying ability. The results also provide some new insights in the hope that potential benefits can be derived from whatever teaching method is followed by the foreign language instructor.

**الملخص**

هدفت هذه الدراسة الى الكشف عن أثر استخدام أسلوبين مختلفين في تعليم اللغة الفرنسية لطلبة المستوى الإبتدائي و ذلك من خلال مقارنة أسلوب الإستجابة البدنية الكلية و أسلوب التواصل الإستراتيجي و قد تم استخدام اختبارات شفوية و كتابية و نحوية للمقارنة في اداء الطلبة الذين تدربوا بطريقة مختلفة في أساليب التعليم المشار إليها. و قد أظهرت النتائج تفوق الطلبة الذين تم تعليمهم بواسطة أسلوب التواصل الإستراتيجي على الأسلوب التعليمي الآخر حيث كان هناك فروق ذات دلالة احصائية.

يوصي الباحثان بإجراء المزيد من التجارب المقارنة على هذا النوع من الأسا ليب الحديثة في تعليم اللغات الأجنبية و استخدام الوسائل الحديثة بشكل عام.

**Introduction**

Previous comparison studies in foreign language teaching have consistently chosen an audio-lingual type method to compare with either a traditional or an innovative method. The audio-lingual method thus became the "standard" against which researchers compared all other methods. A brief survey of some comparative method studies over the last two decades clearly shows this characteristic feature among the experiments that have been reported on in the literature [1]. As far as it can be determined, the study reported here is the only attempt to date to compare two innovative methods without necessarily including a traditional method as part of the research design. The study wad designed to investigate the effects of two innovative teaching methods: Total Physical Response (TPR) AND Strategic Interaction (SI) on students' performance when acquiring French.

Particular merits have been claimed for those two methods on the ground that they incorporate findings from language acquisition research, discourse analysis, psychological and pedagogical principles. The two methods were singled out for comparison because they share the common goal of developing communicative ability, but each has a different focus on aspects of language which form part of this ability. TPR focuses on the acquisition of the target language through physical reacting to oral commands given by the instructor. SI stresses acquisition and development of interactional skills by introducing conflict situations, for whose solution students develop scenarios, which are later acted out and analyzed with a focus on communicative effectiveness [2]. The study intended specifically to see how well students transfer this classroom experience from a base of either the TPR or the SI to natural interaction.

**Subjects**

Forty students of French at the Balamand University, Lebanon, participated in the study in the fall semester of 2008. The students were in two beginning French classes using two different

instructional methods. Twenty of the subjects were in an SI class and the same number was in a TPR class. Many of those students were fulfilling the Arts and Science requirements of a foreign language. The students were placed in the beginning sections on the basis of a cloze placement test. The results of the cloze test, given before the beginning of the semester, determined grouping the students at that level. All participants in both groups were, therefore, considered to be reasonably representative of the general population of college students in elementary foreign language courses.

**Instruction**

To control, at least in part for teacher effect, the two groups were taught by the same instructor. The instructor had been trained in both teaching methods followed in this study. The choice of the instructor was based on his flexibility in teaching habits as well as on his keen interest in implementing innovative methods. He was thoroughly familiar with the goals of the study in order to help him adhere to the instructional program specified in each method. The researcher regularly attended both classes as a learner and as an observer. Conferences between the researcher and the instructor took place daily at the end of the class periods to ensure that versions of the two methods being compared would represent the required instructional procedures of each as envisioned by their respective proponents.

TPR experimental group: according to the TPR syllabus designed for this course, students usually cover between twenty-two and twenty-four lists of vocabulary during a period of fourteen weeks. Each list consists of approximately thirty lexical items. The TPR format followed in this class was first to introduce vocabulary and grammar through commands. Some students acted with the teacher physically (the ACT-ACT group), while the rest observed (the ACT-

OBSERVE group). Individual students from the ACT-OBSERVE group were later called on to respond to the commands given by the teacher. To illustrate meaning adequately, the instructor made appropriate use of gestures, pantomime, and facial expressions. A variety of visual materials such as flash cards, pictures, charts, drawings and stick figures were also used. Students practiced constructing sentences (conversation) through the use of color from kits, visual-aid material developed by Asher [3]. When working with the color form sets, students broke out into groups employing different words in sentences. Students also had an opportunity to practice writing through dictation exercises.

SI experimental group: the SI model does not offer a linguistic specification of a syllabus. Its emphasis is on creating scenarios in which students are faced with different options to deal with a conflict or a problem. Learners select any linguistic content which is called for by the need to use particular language function(s). The interactive goal of SI is, therefore, to teach conversational language primarily through group interaction. Essential to the technique is the avoidance of both explicit error correction and elaborate grammatical drills.

On the first day of class, the instructor briefed students about the rationale behind studying the target language without a text. He did not start out with scenarios during the first week of the classes; instead, he tried to establish a good rapport with the students by working with them on common verbal exchanges such as names, age, major, residence, interests, greetings, and courtesy expressions. The SI teaching procedures were as follows:

1. Offstage phase: students were presented with a scenario involving a problem situation to solve. Students worked in groups to write scripts, to develop roles they choose to play, and to plan strategies pr counter strategies that could

be used effectively during the interaction. The instructor acted on as an advisor, answering different questions that dealt with the scenarios to be developed [4]. Students were then given time to rehearse their roles, which usually took more than one class period.

2. Onstage phase: during this stage, each group performed its scenario, while the rest of the class observed the performance. This took place after the teacher had ascertained that all groups had completed and sufficiently rehearsed their scripts. Each group assigned a leader to explain briefly to the class the roles of the characters in the scenario before acting it out. The instructor took notes about points of difficulties without interrupting students' performance.

3. Debriefing phase: during this stage, the instructor answered students' questions about language forms or functions. Discussions of the points at which the scenarios could have taken a different turn often took place at this stage. For example, students who did not participate in another group's scenario suggested alternative endings (or options) in the use of strategies. At this stage, it was possible for the instructor to go over global errors that were likely to be unintelligible in the target language. Fine-tuned error correction was avoided unless students showed keen interest and curiosity in asking to know more about a particular cultural or linguistic point. In order to give an opportunity for each group to benefit from and be familiar with discussions of the different scenarios, the teacher made typed copies of each group's scenario and distributed them to the whole class. The teacher then went through each mimeographed form of a scenario by asking its composers to read it, to re-play it, and then to answer questions posed by other groups.

**Measures**

The instruments administered for both groups at the end of the study included an oral interview test and three written examinations. The ACTFL/ETS oral proficiency criteria, a recently developed version based on the FSI test, was used to rate performance on the videotaped oral interviews [5]. Students signed up for the interview as part of their course's regular activities. Students were offered a bonus grade in the class, if they were to do well in the interview. It was explained to them that in order to do well on the interview, they needed to do as much talking as possible during the conversation with the interviewer. Interviews lasted between 10 and 15 minutes. Five interviewers conducted the interviews. Three of them were instructors and two were graduate teaching assistants at the university. All interviewers received 14 hours of training and practice in giving oral interviews. None of the interviewers knew the treatment group to which each student belonged. Interviewers also acted as raters, but they did not rate students that they themselves had interviewed. Correlations were computed to determine interrater reliability among the five raters. Reliability coefficients among the raters ranged from 78 to 97.

The written tests were a cloze test, a dictation, and a discrete-point grammar test. The first two written tests were made up by the instructor. The grammar (discrete-point structure) test was based on a standardized type taken from previous National French contests developed by the American Association of Teachers of French (AATF). The cloze test and the dictation, which are widely known to tap global language proficiency, were used because they are increasingly receiving more acceptance in second language research and teaching than before. The need to assess conscious knowledge of the linguistic code was the motivation behind including a discrete-point test in this study.

## Results and Discussion

Table 1 contains the means and standard deviations for each of the four measures. It is evident from this table that subjects in the SI group scored higher than those in the TPR group on each of the measures. As will be seen, however, an analysis of variance indicates that only in one score was the difference significant.

**Table 1**
**Means and Standard Deviations, and Ranges by Group on the Four Measures**

| Group | Oral Interview | Cloze Test | Dictation | Grammar |
|-------|----------------|------------|-----------|---------|
| TPR n-20 | X=1.91 S.D.=1.08 Range=1-5 | X=17.48 S.D.=5.51 Range=5-25 | X=44.70 S.D.=12.80 Range=29-60 | X=16.39 S.D.=4.39 Range=10-23 |
| SI n=20 | X=3.37 S.D.=1.35 Range=1-6 | X=23.77 S.D.=3.28 Range=15-29 | X=58.80 S.D.=4.64 Range=49-64 | X=21.50 S.D.=2.22 Range=15-25 |
| Total n=40 | X=2.74 S.D.=1.43 | X=21.04 S.D.=5.36 | X=52.68 S.D.=11.45 | X=19.28 S.D.=4.15 |

Pearson product-moment correlations among the various measures were calculated. As can be seen in Table 2, correlations between the measures, in general, show that the SI group has higher coefficients. The two groups differ from each other mainly when the oral interview test is combined with the rest of the measures. For example, the correlations which combine,

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**Table 2**
**Correlations Between the Measures by Each Group**

| Measures | TPR | SI | Both Groups Combined |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cloze and Grammar | 77*** | 61*** | 82*** |
| Dictation and Grammar | 53** | 63*** | 71*** |
| Dictation and Cloze | 45** | 59*** | 66*** |
| Interview and Cloze | 35* | 58*** | 60*** |
| Interview and Dictation | 36* | 64*** | 58*** |
| Interview and Grammar | 41* | 37* | 55*** |

in particular, the oral interview test with each of the grammar, dictation, and cloze tests are much lower than the correlations which exclude the oral test. Therefore, combining the oral test with the rest of the measures caused the correlations to drop off suddenly in the TPR group. This substantial difference is not observed in the SI group: for the SI students, stronger correlations were obtained among the four measures. In the TPR group, the correlation between the cloze test and the grammar test (77) diminished markedly to 35 when the cloze test is correlated with the interview. Figures for the same correlations in the SI group were 61 and 58 respectively, giving no indication of a large discrepancy. Here, it must be noted that the TPR group had a lower mean score on the oral interview measure (Table 1). If the oral test assesses interactional competence, as claimed by Bachman and Palmer

[6], it is clear that the TPR students were at a disadvantage when evaluated by such a test. The SI students, however, showed no comparable deficiency.

In view of the foregoing, it is concluded that the SI method helped subjects in that group to achieve a balance of language competence: linguistic as well as interactional. Conversely, it is not surprising that TPR students performed well on the other measures (grammar test, cloze, and dictation) because they tap linguistic aspects related to the grammatical code of the foreign language, which receives an emphasis in TPR [7]. On the other hand, it is also important to observe that despite its focus on interaction, the SI group grammatical competence as indicated by the correlation between the cloze and the grammar test (SI correlation-61, TPR correlation=71). The strong correlation obtained in the TPR group here is probably a result of the considerable emphasis placed on structure by this method.

In reference to the correlations between the dictation and the grammar tests (TPR=53, SI=63) and those between the dictation and the cloze tests (TPR=45, SI=59), it can again be noted that dictation caused the correlations for the TPR group to be lower than those for the SI group. The higher correlations for the SI group between dictation and both the grammar and the cloze tests can be attributed to the fact that the SI method provides students with more opportunities to practice writing and discourse-processing tasks (e.g., in preparing scenario scripts during the offstage phase) than the TPR method. It is worth mentioning here that Asher reported his TPR students performed well in writing on the Pimsleur Spanish proficiency test when compared to audiolingual students' scores [8]. His findings supported the conclusion that TPR students, after ninety hours of training, can perform beyond the fiftieth percentile rank for all skills including the

writing skill. In the present study, however, the TPR students did not perform as well on written tasks as did the SI learners.

**Analysis of Variance**

A multivariate analysis of variance of the four measures can be seen in Table 3. The results of this analysis show that the difference between

**Table 3**
**Multivariate Analysis of Variance of Differences Between the TPR/SI Groups on the Four Measures**

| Measures | Multivariate F |
|---|---|
| Oral Interview Test | 42.3654*** |
| Cloze Test | 4261 |
| Dictation | 0056 |
| Discrete-Point Grammar Test | 2997 |

The two groups in the cloze test, the dictation, and the grammar test is not significant. However, the difference on the oral interview test between the two treatment groups, TPR and SI, is significant at the 001 level. Thus, the SI group significantly outperformed the TPR group on the oral interview only. This difference seems to indicate that interactional, as assessed by the oral interview test, was a language skill that was more highly developed under one method than under the other. The appearance of two types of competency in one method and the lack of one type in another is not surprising in view of the different emphases placed on this language aspect by the two teaching methods. Thus, two types of competency were developing among the SI students: a general global linguistic competence and an interactional type of competence. TPR students, on the other hand, seemed to have a more enhanced global linguistic ability than an

interactional one, as shown by the correlations between the measures (see Table 2) and the multivariate analysis of variance (see Table 3). In other words, students did not develop interactive skills in the TPR method to the extent that they did in the SI method.

This observation seems to complement the model of communicative competence proposed by Bachman and Palmer [9]. Their model rejects the presence of a single, general language factor. Instead, it proposes distinctive underlying abilities for linguistic competence and sociolinguistic or interactive competence. The results of the present study seem to provide further evidence that there are different types of underlying competences. The emphasis placed on the development of different aspects of language by one teaching method, as opposed to another, seems to be a factor in determining how much and which kinds of competency will be more highly developed. The SI method seeks to develop language use and interactive skills to a higher degree than the TPR method. This may have caused the significant difference in performance between the two groups with regard to their interactional competence. The TPR method, on the other hand, appears to develop only a structional competence.

## Concluding Remarks

The findings of this study show that students in both groups tended to learn the basic skills that were emphasized by the method to which they were exposed. Differing emphasis in the method, therefore, produced corresponding differences in performance. The SI students were able to develop both interactive and linguistic competences. TPR students were able to develop a global linguistic competence alone, since there was a low correlation between their linguistic and interactive competences. The communicative competence model proposed by Bachman and Palmer seems

to explain quite well the two types of underlying competences detected in the present study. If Bachman and Palmer's model is correct, as it appears to be, it will give further indication that the nature of the emphasis placed on certain aspects of language skills in a given teaching methodology will result in the development of more than one type of language proficiency.

It is recommended that researchers look at communicative methods for comparison without necessarily including an audio-lingual method, as has often been the case in the literature. The present study was the only attempt to compare two innovative methods without using an audio-lingual method as a control group. It is further recommended that real-world classroom situations, such as in this study, be used to explore the effects produced by communicative methods. The real classroom setting includes a sample of students who are fulfilling foreign language requirements within the framework of regular examinations, normal college attendance, periodical grading, attendance requirement, and the like.

The findings of this study have raised an important question which a foreign language teacher needs to consider: what could be the most valuable aspect in learning how to speak a target language - an ability in acquiring the structural/grammatical code or an ability in acquiring interactive skills through the strategic use of the language? It appears that we often emphasize the goal of developing interactional skills through the wrong means, i.e., mastering structural elements by following a preordained, discrete item syllabus (a lockstep syllabus). Interactional skills do not need to follow paced productions of structures selected according to the difficulty or facility with which they occur. Interaction starts well with language use rather than with linguistic code. It is recommended, therefore, that foreign language teachers

give more attention to how the linguistic structure is implemented in order to serve language, rather than sacrifice use for code or structure. The results of this study were presented to provide some new insights in the hope that potential benefits can be derived from whatever teaching method is followed by the instructor.

Finally, it would be interesting a future study, to investigate the value of what has come to be called recently: "form focused instruction" or (FFI). This type of classroom instruction relies on teaching language forms either implicitly or explicitly. To our knowledge, no empirical study in the Middle East has been done on FFI except a recent unpublished M.A thesis conducted at the University of Balamand entitled "Investigating noticing strategies in intensive English program at Balamand University" 2009, by Hania Yassine.

## Notes

[1] For a good and brief review of method comparison studies see Stephen D. Krashen, Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982) pp. 146-160.

For a more detailed description of TPT see James Asher, Learning Another Language Through Actions: The Complete Teacher's Guidebook (California: Sky Oaks Production, 1982). For the SI, see the following papers written by Robert Di Pietro: "Verbal Strategies, Script Theory and Conversational Performances in ESL", in On TESOL, ed. C. Blatchford and J. Schachter (Washington, DC: TESOL, 1978), pp. 149-156; "The Many Dimensions of Conversational Language", in Seventh LACUS Forum, ed. J. Copeland and P. Davis (Columbia, SC: Hornbeam Press, 1980), pp. 467-74; and "The Open-Ended Scenario: A New

Approach to Conversation", TESOL Quarterly, 16 (1982), pp. 15-10.

[3] The TPR students used color from kits, The Home ad The Town – visual aid material developed by Asher (see Asher, note 2 above). The kits contain colored figures illustrating the meaning of different lexical items. Students used this material in order to practice constructing sentences (conversation).

[4] Six scenarios were developed by the SI students during the semester. A list of the scenarios used is given in the Appendix at the end.

[5] The ACTFL/ETS provisional speaking definitions were used to evaluate performance on the oral interview. The definitions are designed especially for language assessment in an academic setting. Since this investigation was concerned with assessing the oral proficiency of elementary language students only, there was no need to use the advanced level scale. Thus, two levels of proficiency were used: (1) novice-low, (2) novice-mid, (3) novice-high, (4) intermediate-low, (5) intermediate-mid, and (6) intermediate-high. For a detailed description of this oral test see "Foreign Language Oral Proficiency Assessment", (Educational Testing Service, Princeton, N.J., 1982).

[6] Lyle F. Bachman and Adrian S., Palmer, "The Construct Validation of Some Components of Communicative Proficiency", TESOL Quareterly, 16 (1982), pp. 449-64.

[7] The TPR syllabus usually contains linguistic items that are graded lexically and grammatically n terms of complexity at the sentence level. For an evaluation of the TPR, see Jck Richards and Ted Rogers, "Method: Approach, Design, and Procedure", TESOL Quarterly, 16 (1982), 153-168. Richards

and Rogers identify three theoretical views of language that underlie current teaching methods in an explicit or implicit way: the structural view, the functional view, and the interactional view. The writers maintain that "TPR appears to be based on a formalistic structural model focusing primarily on the form rather than the content…Language is viewed as a code composed of structural elements which have to be mastered". See also Thomas Scovel, "Emphasizing Language: A Reply to Humanism, Neoaudiolingualism, and Notional-Functionalism", (On TESOL '82, ED. M. Clark and J. Handscombe), pp. 85-96. In this article, Scovel also described the TPR as structural. On the other hand, SI focuses on learning how to use language strategically without having to present a particular linguistic list of items. The SI theory requires a personal involvement of the learner in the use of the target language, working toward personally desired goals. The SI is, therefore, explicitly based on an interactional model language focusing mainly on the content rather than grammar or the linguistic code alone. (See Di Pietro, note 2 above.

[8] See Asher (note 2 above), pp. 13-14.

[9] See Bachman and Palmer (note 6 above.

[10] See more definitions of (FFI) in Brown, 2007; Williams, Jessica, 2005; Doughty 2003.

**References**

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**Appendix**

The scenarios below are listed in the order in which they were presented to the SI class.

1.    You are on a bus with several other people, and you noticed that a pickpocket has just snatched the purse of the woman sitting next to you. What would you say to her? What would the people around you say? How would the bus driver respond? What would the woman say and do?

2.    Role A: For a long while, you have wanted to invite a classmate out with you. You decide on a place, but she/he doesn't seem very interested in your offer. You may want to make the invitation as attractive as possible.

Role B: A person in your class invited you out, but you are reluctant about accepting his/her invitation. You want to be courteous as possible when refusing. Your final decision should be based on the attractiveness of your classmate's offer.

3.    You've been biking through France with a few friends, and are very tired. It's about 10:00 p.m., so you go to the local camp ground to find a place to pitch tent and sleep for the night. After several unsuccessful attempts at finding a camp ground with vacancies, you decide to spend the night in a large field. You pitch tent and fall fast asleep, when you are awakened by the footsteps of someone around your tent. It's the owner of the land, and he seems very angry. For the past few months, he has been having a lot of trouble keeping tourists like yourself off his property. Create a scenario between the campers and the owner.

4.    Open-ended scenario: (introduced by a presentation on family members)

A)    If you could say one thing to your father (mother, brother…) what would it be? (students' responses are given, and then they are directed to stage spontaneously the following encounter).

B)    Using what you answered to the above question, imagine that (student's name) is your brother (sister…), and it's dinner time at your home. How would the encounter unfold after your statement?

5.    You have been shopping for a new care for some time. You have noticed several models, and considered the advantage of each one. You have finally come to a decision about the car you should buy, when you decide to go to one last dealership to be sure your choice is the best. At the dealership, you meet a car salesman who has not made a sale for some time. The owner of the dealership has told the salesman that, unless he sells a car within the week, he will lose his job. Write a scenario about the encounter between you and the salesman.

6.    Your car has broken down on a dark, deserted road. There is no one in sight, so you decide to walk down the road to look for help. In the distance, you see a house with its lights on. You approach the house and knock on the door. No one answers. Your attention is drawn to the aroma of a freshly baked blueberry pie that you see sitting on the kitchen table. You are eating a piece of the pie, when suddenly the door opens and the owners enter. Create a scenario about the encounter between the owners and you.