Total Physical Response

GAVIN BUI

Framing the Issue

Developed by James Asher in the 1960s, total physical response (TPR) is a language-teaching approach based on the coordination of language and physical movement. It "introduces the language through the use of commands (imperative sentences) and has students demonstrate their understanding through action responses" (Asher, 1984, p. 35). TPR is probably the most overt example of the "learning by doing" principle in language teaching as it aims to help learners acquire language through physical actions without explicitly teaching it. Asher believes that such a teaching strategy (he prefers "strategy" to "method") is fun and stress-free, which helps with long-term retention of what has been learned.

TPR was developed as an attempt to mirror how preverbal children acquire their mother tongue. Asher (1984) recalled his earlier observation that less than 5% of adult second language learners gain satisfactory final attainment while most 6-year-olds have reached a high level of native proficiency without schooling. He noted that (a) children pick up language unconsciously without explicit instruction on forms; (b) children are not forced to produce language until they are ready, so there is a silence period; (c) during this period, children respond to input by physical movements, with most of the input being directives. By comparison it is obvious that second language learners lack these critical elements which at least partially explain why there is such a contrast in linguistic achievement between babies and adults.

As a result of these observations, Asher proposed TPR to teach a second language through students acting out instructions. The first edition of *Learning Another Language Through Actions: The Complete Teacher's Guidebook* (Asher, 1977) marked the beginning of systematically implementing TPR in the classroom. TPR has been extending its use from listening comprehension to speaking, reading, and even writing. In the following sections, we will first discuss key theoretical considerations of TPR and its relevant research findings. Then we will offer pedagogical implications to delineate how TPR may benefit students in the classroom.

Making the Case

Albeit being often described as a simple and straightforward teaching method, TPR is in fact rooted in theories of cognitive science and the behaviorist tradition of psychology. Asher and his colleagues have also presented empirical support to the implementation of TPR among learners of different ages across a wide range of first language backgrounds (Asher, 2009). Not surprisingly though, TPR has met with some significant criticism. We shall review each of these topics in this section.

Theoretical Issues

TPR is rooted in cognitive science. Asher believes that one of the main reasons for the low success rate of L2 learners is the over-reliance on the left hemisphere of the brain in most of other teaching methods. The human brain is separated into the left hemisphere and the right hemisphere with different functions lateralized into each. The left hemisphere is responsible for analytic skills and language, while the right hemisphere for synthetic, visual-spatial, emotional, and motor skills. Although language shows strong left brain dominance for most people, Asher argues that language acquisition with the left brain is "slow-motion learning" as each detail of speaking, which the learner is currently incapable of making, is practiced before s/he has internalized a holistic pattern of how language works (Asher, 1984). He believes that if a student can first decipher the meaning of the language in the right brain associated with observed actions, his/her left brain would be able to gradually interpret and decode the language system after sufficient exposure. If one starts learning a language with the left hemisphere, the learning experience will be halting and stressful; the language knowledge is hard to retain for an extended period of time. In contrast, learning with the right brain through actions, especially at the beginning stage, will allow learners to follow a more natural route of development and lead to more sustainable learning outcome.

TPR is a comprehension approach to language teaching as it places emphasis on auditory input on language development and does not require output until learners are ready. The rationale underlying such a priority is that human brain has a "pre-wired" capacity of acquiring language through listening. When sufficient input is received and retained in the long-term memory, one would be able to decode the language system and internalize it. At this beginning stage learners are allowed to be silent, or to respond by physical movements. When they have learned enough language through the input, they will attempt to speak spontaneously. Obviously such a rationale bears much resemblance to Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis that input alone, if made understandable to the learner, is a sufficient condition to acquire a language.

TPR is also intended to be a natural approach to language learning. First, students are not forced to produce language until they feel ready and happy to do so. However, students are not listening idly either; they show their understanding by acting out what they hear, such as "sit down" and "pick up the pen." This is mimicking how babies respond to their caretakers before they can actually speak.

Second, there is no explicit teaching involved; instead students pick up the language as an unanalyzed chunk through listening. It follows that there is no aptitude requirement in TPR and that it is suitable for learners of different backgrounds. Third, errors are much tolerated in TPR when students attempt to speak. Language infelicities, if any, are seen as inevitable but healthy, and are likely to disappear as they continue to learn more. Again we can see how first language acquisition in a natural context is reflected in TPR.

Affective consideration is another important theoretical dimension of the TPR method. Given its unique features, Asher argues that TPR is stress-free, enjoyable, and rewarding. First of all, since one will never be required to speak unless one feels comfortable, one is under little pressure in learning. Furthermore, TPR stressed combing new lexical items with the old and all commands are context-supported, so the learning process is virtually manageable to almost all. Then by acting out instructions from the teacher, the classroom is turned into an activity room. Students, especially those at younger ages, should find it interesting and exciting. Finally, as Asher (2009) showed, TPR helps with long-term retention of language acquired, and is more likely to give learners a sense of achievement.

Asher (2009) summarized a range of empirical studies that reported significantly positive effects of TPR. Research showed that TPR worked well not only in teaching English but also other languages such as Japanese, Russian, and German. Also, quite opposite to the common belief that TPR is only suitable for young beginners, Asher and others found that adult learners actually outperformed primary school pupils who in turn did better than kindergarten children.

Evaluation

TPR boasts some distinctive advantages in teaching a second language. First of all, as mentioned above, TPR greatly reduces the stress and can be interesting to students. Second, TPR helps students to achieve long-lasting learning outcome as it involves frequent recycling of language contents. Meanwhile, such repetition is disguised as commands can be delivered in different combinations; boredom or fatigue is less of an issue here. Third, this method starts with right-brain learning, so there is no analytic or academic skill requirement. It is an aptitude-free approach that gives everyone a chance in language learning. Finally, from a teacher's perspective, TPR is easy to implement as it does not require a textbook (unless until a very late stage) or extensive lesson or realia preparations.

Nevertheless, TPR has also met with various critical comments. The biggest problem is probably how much it can actually teach, except for a limited set of verbs (often in the present tense only) and nouns. Obviously not everything (not even verbs like "need" and "seem") can be performed by physical actions. Though TPR has been shown to be effective for adult learners at different proficiency levels, in reality it is rarely used beyond the beginning level at the young ages. Indeed it would be quite embarrassing for some adult learners with different cultural backgrounds, such as those from China and Arabia, to perform commands like *jump* and *run* in public. Another issue concerns the roles of teachers and students.

In TPR the teacher dominates the class while the students are just passive learners; they lack opportunity to express themselves creatively. Last but not least, TPR tries to replicate how babies acquire their mother tongues. It seems to ignore the fact that the brain gradually matures and loses it plasticity as the baby grows up, leading to a qualitative difference in language learning between babies and adults. Modern cognitive science has lent much support to the critical period hypothesis, and therefore a teaching method based on direct analogy between the first and the second language is just too simplistic.

Pedagogical Implications

Though it is typically used to introduce language to students before they are ready to speak at the beginning stage, TPR can be adapted for various other needs at even more advanced levels. The following will discuss how TPR can be implemented in terms of pre-class preparations, classroom teaching, and post-class assessment.

Before the lesson, the teacher should set an achievable objective by understanding what students have learned. The new language items will be combined with the old so that repetition is disguised to avoid loss of interest. No textbook is required until later. Visual aids such as pictures and props can be prepared as the class progresses.

During the lesson, the teacher will first demonstrate the action as s/he gives the instruction and then invites students to do the same. When students successfully associate the commands with the actions, the teacher instructs only by words. Meaning is prioritized over forms during TPR while first language support (translation) should be avoided. After an exciting session of performance, the teacher can ask the students to sit down and show them the written commands on a card or project them on the screen to reinforce the spoken instructions.

At the beginning level, vocabulary (mainly verbs and the nouns associated with these verbs, such as "open the door") drills are the major activities where meaning is clarified through physical movements. Richards and Rodgers (2001) suggested that 12 to 36 lexical items can be accommodated in a lesson depending on the level of students and the class size. As the students progress, longer and more complex phrases (e.g., "go fetch the book under the desk") and a combination of these phrases (e.g., *go fetch the green book under the desk, pass it to your partner, and shake hands with him/her*) can be introduced to increase the intensity of input, with other word classes such as prepositions and adjectives all coming into play. Grammar is not explicitly explained here and students are expected to work out the rules from the input. The principle here is that the new addition of language items is always coupled with previously learned content so that learners are provided enough clues from the context to figure out the meaning. It should be noted that TPR does not teach lexis only; instead it can offer students a natural way of understanding how language works from simple commands like "sit down" to more advanced structures like "draw a sun on the paper if it is sunny today" which involves a main clause and a subordinate clause.

While listening is the major source of learning, speaking will start as a learner feels comfortable. The instructor should allow students to respond with physical movements or to speak in their L1, because all this indicates their effort to make sense of the input. The teacher should never force students to produce the target language. When production begins to emerge as a student repeats the teacher's commands, s/he should be encouraged but not rushed. Richards and Rodgers (2001) recommended 120 hours of TPR training before engaging students in conversational dialogues. At any time errors should be tolerated while explicit correction should be avoided. At later stages feedback can be given implicitly in the forms of recast (e.g., Student: Clap hand. Teacher: Yes! Clap your hands), confirmation check (e.g., Student: pick up pencil (as he picks up a pen). Teacher: pencil?), and clarification requests (e.g., Student: Get two. Teacher: Two what? Student: Two books!). The aim is to create a stress-free environment and to maximize joyful learning experience.

Reading and writing are not the focus of TPR but both skills can be trained in combination with commands. Pinkasová (2011) suggested that the teacher have students pick up a piece of paper with a command on it and perform the action at a later stage, instead of giving instructions orally. Then students start reading naturally. In conjunction with this activity, students can write commands for each other to kick off their own writing experience. Again the transitions between speaking, reading, and writing can be made undisruptive and the teacher can alternate these skills to develop students' flexibility and increase the variety of teaching. Obviously the more proficient students become, the more traditional teaching methods should be employed in training reading and writing.

Assessment in TPR is straightforward—for beginners the instructor simply observes the student acting out commands to determine whether s/he has effective comprehension of the target language. At the intermediate level, however, Asher suggests evaluating student through skits created and performed by students. Students are evaluated in terms of their fluency in the target language and the amount of new sentences spoken. The extent of novel utterances is the index of students working out the linguistic system through input (Pinkasová, 2011). At the advanced level, traditional language tests can be applied and Asher (2009) provided evidence that students trained with TPR outperformed those from regular classes in all four skills of language use.

SEE ALSO: Affect; Direct Method; Games; Role Play; Young Learners

References

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Suggested Reading

Asher, J. J. (2009). *Learning another language through actions* (7th ed.). Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions.