

APPLICATION OF TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE IN CHILDREN'S ESL
EDUCATION

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APPLICATION OF TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE IN CHILDREN'S ESL
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Abstract

Recent years, the foreign language teaching in China specially emphasizes the importance of stimulating students' learning interest. It put great emphasis on making the students learn in the relaxed atmosphere, and people pay more and more attention to the English education environment. Therefore, English education for children should give up the traditional educational model, and explore a set model to suit the children's development that combines children's psychological and physiological feature.

This thesis aims to illustrate the effect of Total Physical Response teaching approach on young children in the kindergarten and children in the primary school. It explains the theoretical basis of TPR and analyzes the advantage and function of TPR in primary English teaching. It also discusses the concrete training in stimulating and improving young ESL learners' learning interest combining with some activities.

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

According to child psychology, children's language ability is developed through practical application; thus, the acquisition of language should be nature and direct. Total Physical Response (TPR) is a teaching method which claims that teacher should teach English through facial expressions and exaggerate actions (Xu, 2007). In this way, children can learn English more effectively and efficiently.

According to Pallen (1988) there are several basic features of TPR instruction: "First, students develop new vocabulary through the use of commands. Second, students demonstrate their understanding through actions. Third, students speak when they are ready. The teacher allows and encourages a 'silent period'." The basic procedure for TPR lesson is as follows:

- "1) the teacher gives the command and then models the action while the students listen and watch.
- 2) The teacher gives the command and models the action; the students copy the action.
- 3) The teacher gives the command without modeling; the students perform the appropriate action.
- 4) The teacher gives the command without modeling the action; the students repeat the verbal commands and perform the action.
- 5) One student gives the command and the teacher or others students repeat the verbal commands and perform the action." (p. 37)

Through the specific procedures, we can find that the command and the action are repeated again and again. In this way, first, students can establish the connection

between the target language and the action and understand the target language by themselves. Second, students will remember the meaning of the target language unconsciously. So students will feel less frustrated and stressed when they are studying. Moreover, students, especially young children, are easy to be attracted by teachers' exaggerated facial expression and action. And when they are doing the action, their right brains are developing, which will help them to remember.

In this paper, I will introduce the method of Total Physical Response first, and then discuss why and how TPR can help teachers to improve their teaching through analyzing the features of children learning. Ways of using TPR in classroom will also be presented.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed as a question is as follows: How can teacher use TPR method to improve their teaching?

Definition of Term

Total Physical Response. Total Physical Response (TPR) is a teaching technique that teachers of English as a second language (ESL) use to instruct students who are in the process of learning a second language. Students in programs that use the TPR approach spend much of their time listening to and physically responding to the teacher. (Conroy, 1999)

ESL. Abbreviation for the term English as a second Language.

Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, and Library of SCUN, over eighty-eight (88) days. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO with Academic Search Elite, CNKI and Wilson Index as the primary sources. Key search topics included “TPR”, “Children education”.

Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on the studies of TPR and children education will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theoretical Background

Background of children's English education in China

Children's English education started to be popular in China at the beginning of the 20th century. Motivated by globalization, there is an increasing number of Chinese interested in learning English. According to many experts in the areas of language and education, 3-6 years old is the key period for the language acquisition. Therefore, most parents hope their children will learn English in childhood. They would like to send their children to kindergartens in which English classes are offered, or to English training schools which focuses on the English language.

In an English class, students' interest and participation are considered to be the key to successful teaching and learning (Ling, 1999). All early childhood teachers are concerned with methods that help to motivate students and reduce children's stress and frustration. TPR promises to be responsive to young children's needs.

Background of Total Physical Response (TPR)

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a teaching method for second language education. TPR originated from the way that children acquire their first language by listening to and physically responding to their interlocutors. According to Asher (1984), TPR works as an excellent way of providing students with comprehensible input; the teacher's movement provides the background knowledge that makes the

command more comprehensible. According to Diaz (2005), who is a former language teacher and consultant in TPR and language instruction in general, the research base for TPR dates back to the 1960s, and experiments performed with epileptic volunteers whose right and left brain hemispheres were surgically severed. (The idea was that epileptic seizures begin on one side of the brain and migrated to the other, so if they could isolate the event to one side of the brain, the seizures might be less extreme.) Asher, as a psychologist, was one of the researchers. From then on, he began to investigate some interesting relationships between language and movement. His work led him to formulate the theory known today as Total Physical Response, or TPR.

Asher developed the approach from 30 years of research. The research has been promising and today TPR is being used successfully in thousands of classrooms with children. Although it has not received generalized support from mainstream educators at the very beginning, it has become popular since the 1970's and attracted the attention of many teachers and researchers (Conroy, 1999; Frost & Council, 2007; Pallen, 1988; Song, 2008; Xu, 2007; Hart, 1983)

Introduction of Total Physical Response

Asher's premise is based on Chomsky's theory of LAD, which insists "humans are born with a special biological brain mechanism, called a Language Acquisition Device (LAD). This theory supposes that the ability to learn language is inborn, that nature is more important than nurture." (Theories about how young children acquire and develop language, 2004, p. 2) Asher believes that the human

brain has a biological program for acquiring any language spoken. The process is visible when we observe how infants internalize their first language. Diaz (2005) explained that infants learn language naturally. They are exposure to language accompanied by physical activities, during the time they are immersed in language they can not understand. Gradually, infants learn to response to orders on the base of conditioned reflex. That is to say they will respond to some regular outside stimulation. For example, parents say “hand”. The infant will raise its hand. Diaz also provides another example. When an infant is having a bath, the child learns new vocabulary because its parents keep talking about what occurs and how the child feels, such as “soaping your hands”, “get into the warm water”, and so on. This is the principle of TPR.

During the process of using TPR teaching method, the teacher creates a situation for students in which students learn the second language in the same way that they would learn their first language. In “How to TPR abstractions: The critical role of imagination”, Asher (2002) summarizes his research: “[Acquiring] any language from one’s native language to other languages does not begin with production. It begins with a long period of silence, which for an infant, lasts for months.” During this period, the child transfers the language they heard from noise to meaning signal, which they can make sense and give response. Asher designates the way in which infants’ decoding noise by the term “language body conversations”.

Frost and Council (2007) also believe in language-body conversation and TPR method. Frost and Council write that:

[P]arents have “language-body conversations” with their children, the parent instructs and the child physically responds to this. The parent says, “Look at mummy” or “Give me the ball” and the child does so. These conversations continue for many months before the child actually starts to speak itself. Even though it can’t speak during this time, the child is taking in all of the language; the sounds and the patterns. Eventually when it has decoded enough, the child reproduces the language quite spontaneously. TPR attempts to mirror this effect in the language classroom. (p. 1)

Asher, Frost and Council’s explanations and examples provide us a general idea of the principle of TPR—to imitate the process of infants’ first language acquisition. There is a process for incorporated TPR in the second language learning classroom.

Therefore, the essence of TPR is that learners are silent, listen to a command in the language being taught, then, and obey the command by acting it out with the instructor as a model. (Asher, 1965) After a period of keeping silent, listening to the instructor and acting, i.e. understanding the meaning, the children start to talk and reproduce the language. In a word, the features of TPR include the following items:

- Students develop new vocabulary through the use of commands.
- Students demonstrate their understanding through actions.
- Students speak when they are ready. The teacher allows and encourages a “silent period” (Pallen, 1988).

Asher (1984) compares the instructor in TPR to a movie director. Because he guides actors - the students - through complicated scenes much like a parent guiding

an infant through intimate caretaking situations. Just as the infant develops an intricate understanding of spoken language, students acquire, with pleasure, an in-depth understanding of the target language (Asher, 1984). With the method of TPR, the ESL learners can learn the language naturally, effectively and without stress.

Asher (1995) summed three elements that explain the success of TPR. First, it is aptitude-free. This means that the approach is effective for everyone in the normal curve of ability, not just those with a high academic ability. Second, there are no age barriers. Third, TPR is stress-free because it is, to use Hart's theory of "brain compatible" rather than traditional "brain antagonistic" approaches which start with production or memorization or explicit grammar instruction.

A Brain Compatible Instructional Method

Hart's Brain-Based Theory

In the book, *Human Brain and Human Learning*, Hart (1983) brought forward the terms such as "brain-based learning", "brain compatible", "brain antagonistic" and "brain overload". Advocates of brain-based teaching/learning insist that there is a difference between "brain-compatible" education, and "brain-antagonistic" teaching practices and methods which can actually prevent learning.

Hart (1983) compares teaching without an awareness of how the brain learns to designing a glove with no sense of what a hand looks like. That means it will be uncomfortable and inconvenient. Hart (1983) pushes this analogy even further in order to drive home his primary point: "[If] classrooms are to be places of learning,

then ‘the organ of learning’, the brain, must be understood and accommodated.” Hart (1983) states:

All around us are hand-compatible tools and machines and keyboards, designed to fit the hand. We are not apt to think of them in that light, because it does not occur to us that anyone would bring out some device to be used by human hands without being sure that the nature of hands was considered. A keyboard machine or musical instrument that called for eight fingers on each hand would draw instant ridicule. Yet we force millions of children into schools that have never seriously studied the nature and shape of the human brain, and which not surprisingly prove actively brain-antagonistic. (p.27)

In the paragraph above, Hart represents two points clearly. First, the process of language acquisition needs to be brain-compatible. It should be in accord with the way in which human brain works. In other words, the way in which teacher teaches should relate to how children’s brain work. Second, so far, most traditional teaching methods are brain-antagonistic, that is to say, they are not benefit for children’s brain to acquire the language.

TPR is consistent with this brain-based rule, because ESL learners follow a procedure of remaining silent, listening—responding with action (comprehension and memorization) and speaking. It can avoid the harm of “brain overload” or “brain antagonistic training” effectively. In order to explain this point clearly, it was necessary to make a research on how the human brain works, especially when it is dealing with language. According to Asher (2004), speech and comprehension are located in different parts of the brain. Talking comes from Broca’s area located in the frontal lobe of the left brain. If there is damage in Broca’s area, one may understand what people are saying but the person is unable to speak. Understanding or comprehension takes place in Wernicke’s area located in the temporal lobe. If there is

damage to Wernicke's area, one can speak but has difficulty understanding what others are saying. Asher writes: "When the instructor asks students to 'Listen and repeat after me, it may lead learners to be brain overload because both the frontal lobe and the temporal lobe in the brain light up at the same time resulting in slow-motion learning with short-term retention" (p. 2). When teachers use TPR teaching method, they allow students to listen first, and after a period preparation, they encourage children to speak. In this way, different parts of children's brain will work in turn and advance each other.

Makoto' Right Brain Theory

Shichida Makoto is a well-known figure in Japan. He has been committed more than 40 years to develop techniques to stimulate the early development of the brain. He is also an expert in early education. His Right Brain Theory has been very popular in Asia. This theory focuses on the right hemisphere of the brain, which develops before the left hemisphere and which Shichida calls "the genius brain". The idea of the theory is that by stimulating the right brain, the whole brain will benefit. Shichida Makoto also mentioned that when a baby is born, he or she has the natural ability to use the right brain ("The early learning experts: Makoto Shichida", 2003).

However, the traditional school system is designed for the left brain. "In classrooms, students are sitting in rows and columns and facing one direction to receive information that is delivered in serial order through verbal media either in speech or in print. Input is to half of the brain—the left side" (Asher, 2001, p. 2). TPR method, in which the body-language conversation between infants and parents is

adopted, encourages the learners to use the right brain. Asher (2001) illustrates this with an example. When children are asked to learn a textbook in another language, they are usually nervous and often frustrated, because it is totally strange to them. Their left brain will choose to escape and refuse it. It will whisper this messages as Asher states “Oh, oh! Nothing in this book looks familiar you don’t understand any of this. You probably never will! This looks difficult! You are going to have a terrible time with this book! Better get out now, if you can!” (p. 3) Asher’s solution to this problem is to make use of children’s right brain by adopting TPR. He suggests combing the book to list adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and nouns that students can internalize with TPR before students read the book. In this way, students will feel familiar with the content so that they will feel less frustrated and more confident.

The Significance of Using TPR in Children’s English Teaching in China

TPR teaching method was invented in the United States and it has been becoming a hot topic in Chinese educational field as well. Many experts and researchers have studied the TPR method, and in most of their works, they answered why it is important to adopt TPR method in China, especially in children’s ESL class. The answers can be mainly divided into two categories.

First, the traditional left-brain approaches which we all have experienced in many of second language classes (including English as a Second Language) simply do not work (Asher, 2001). Chinese traditional teaching method focuses on teaching of grammar, i.e. the teacher helps students to control the language through analyzing the

grammar structure. For example, “There is a book on the table.” This simple sentence is related to at least three grammatical points, such as existential sentence, the usage of article, and prepositional phrase. Even if the students understand all of these grammatical points, they may not be able to speak this sentence immediately nor can they additionally explain their meaning in the second language when they want to explain it, because they need at least three steps—thinking about the three grammar points one by one—to construct this sentence. These steps need much of their consciousness and take a long time to think. What the traditional grammatical method teaches is not the vivid oral English, but the written language which is very hard for children to comprehend. (Zheng, 2008)

Second, as a stress-free method, TPR is suitable to the characteristics of children. According to Zheng (2008), in TPR teaching method, the teacher teaches English through all kinds of activities including running, jumping and playing games, rather than sitting on their chairs in silence. In this way, the environment of the class is vivid and active, and the children acquire the language voluntarily, therefore, they can focus longer on the tasks. The teacher repeats the language naturally, and children only need to react to the teacher through body movement. In this way, the students can take part in the teaching activity, but generally they experience less stress because children are involved in “fun” activities at the time. Psychologists show that forcing children to repeat what the teacher said will lead to the children’s feeling of stress and nervousness, and limit the language development on language acquisition. First, students will feel boring. Second, when they repeat the teacher’s word mechanically,

children usually think is a process of learning in which somebody is valuing them. They worry about whether their performance is good, whether their prognostication is standard, whether the teacher will approve them, whether others will laugh at them. Third, unconscious repetition cannot leave deep impression on children.

Liu (2007) states that, based on educational psychology, most children are active, good at imitation and accepting new objects, and willing to show themselves in any situation; they learn because they are interested; they can memorize quickly, but unfortunately, most of the memory is generally cannot be kept for long. Therefore, when they are teaching, teachers should adopt the mode of “input first, output later”, i.e. TPR method.

The inclusion of TPR method in ESL classrooms will benefit hundreds and thousands of Chinese teachers and children. Just as Song (2008) states that many TPR activities are interesting, challenging and motivating, so almost all the students enjoy them. The use of TPR provides a fun way for young children to learn English. It relieves students' anxiety, builds up relaxing atmosphere and encourages students to be interested in English learning, and to have fun in English class. Furthermore, when the students take part in the TPR activities, they may get more chances to practice. They may get more feeling of success which can facilitate their English learning.

Research

The research of TPR has been lasting for more than 30 years. The principle of this method is to imitate the way in which the infant acquires the first language; the

key of using this method is to give students enough time to listen and prepare before they speak. A lot of experimental studies have been taken to show the advantages of TPR, and today TPR is being used successfully in thousands of classrooms with children. There are many evidences to show the success of TPR teaching method.

The Whisman School Project

Jackson and her colleagues started a three year research project in 1979 at the Whisman School District in Mountain View, California. The targets were children in elementary school with deficiencies in English language skill. They were divided into two groups. The teacher taught students in an experimental group by using Total Physical Response approach individually or in small groups to enhance their comprehension and expressive skills. The students in the control group accepted a traditional audio-lingual production-oriented training program. All of them accepted the training one hour a day. (Asher, 2003)

Three years later, the experimental group had the following gains when compared with the control group: “(a) on the average, a 1.5 year advantage in vocabulary; (b) 80% more comprehension on the average, and (c) an average comprehensive increase in expressive skills of 130%.” (Asher, 2003, p.2-17)

Mary Hamilton’s Laboratory Studies

Mary Hamilton conducted an experiment to prove children who acted in response to commands would have better retention than children who sat and observed a model act.

The children in the experimental group listened to a command in Russian, then acted with a model during training, and later demonstrated retention by

acting individually in response to commands. The control children listened to a command in Russian, then observe a model act during training, but later demonstrated retention by writing English translation in response to commands. (Asher, 2003 P2-7)

The results showed that “the retention of children who acted in response to Russian commands was far superior (beyond the .01 level) compared with the children who sat and merely observed a model act.” (Asher, p.2-7)

Total Physical Response English

Total Physical Response English are a series of textbooks, which are published by Foreign Language Teaching and Study Press, Beijing in 1999. These textbooks are edited on the base of TPR teaching method, and for children’s English education. According to the textbooks and the videos configured, teachers or parents can teach children English through the ways which children like such as performing, playing games, and watching pictures. Since they were published, *Total Physical Response English* have been recommended by English educators in China. For example, Xu (2001) who has used *Total Physical Response English* as textbooks in her class claims, first, the content of the textbooks is novel, extensive and practical. Second, the activities in the books are diverse, comprehensive, and scientific. Many English training schools choose *Total Physical Response English* as their textbooks for students, such as Dalian Athena Foreign Language School, American TPR English School in Zhuhai, and Sibio Educational Center in Changzhou.

Annapolis Language School

The founder of this school—Adrienne Cruz is an experienced Spanish teacher, who is frustrated by traditional language teaching tools. She opened this school so she

could use TPR to teach her students. She describes this method like a “charm”. She told the journalist “It’s almost instant gratification. Students feel like they’re saying so much.” Actually, her students speak highly of TPR teaching method, too. Carl Tenner, one of her students said “It’s a very different approach to teaching.” By 2008, she has offered five classes, and she hoped to hire more instructors so that she can add more classes and even more languages. (Storytelling and Physical Response at Heart of Md. Language Method, 2008)

Only Language Training School in China

I used to be a teacher for kids in Only Language Training School in China. All of my students were children among 3-6 years old. The textbook we used were designed on the base of TPR, and I taught them by using TPR approach. I had 4 to 8 children in each class. Students accepted the training once a week and two class hours a time. After they finished the learning of the textbook—about five months—, all of the students I have taught were able to perform the fairy tale in the book with fluently oral expression and vivid gesture and facial expression.

TPR Activities

Through reading and studying relational literatures, many practical teaching and learning games and activities have been found. Frost and Council (2007) suggest two games:

The first game is to organize the students into a circle. The teacher who is in the middle of the circle says the word and students response with the physical action.

The last person to do the action is out. This procedure can be repeated until there is only one student. He or she is the winner.

Frost and Council suggest extending the first game by playing Simon Says. When the teacher gives a command, students should only do it if the teacher says “Simon says...” at the start. For example, the teacher might say, “Simon say ‘slice some bread’” and the students must do the action. However if he says “Whisk and egg”, students shouldn’t do this. If anyone does the action that Simon doesn’t say then they are out and have to watch for the mistakes of the other students.

Joseph Deveto (2005) illustrates a demo activity that can be used in TPR class on his website. It is “Making a Sandwich”. The teacher gives the commands to instruct the children to making sandwich by them. The command including: “Slice some bread”, “Spread butter on both slices”, “Spread the butter to all corners of the bread”, “Put a piece of meat on one slice of bread”, “Put lettuce, tomatoes and cheese on top of the meat”, “Place the second slice of bread on top and close the sandwich”, “Cut the sandwich in half”, “Take a bite”.

Children will enjoy this kind of activity for the direct experience of objects—bread, tomatoes, cheese—they can have fun in the class, and be interested in the class and the target language. Unfortunately, this type of activities rarely appears in Chinese classes.

TPR Bingo was created by Garcia (1994). The teacher calls out a direction in the target language such as “The man opens the door.” Students listen to the utterance,

search for a matching picture and if it is on their blackboard, cover it with a chip. When students listen to the instructor utter directions in the target language, they are internalizing comprehension. But, as they advance in understanding, individual students will ask to play the role of the caller which gives students valuable practice in reading and speaking.

Some Chinese researchers also list the TPR activities in their pedagogy. Zheng (2008) suggested using the following activity: The teacher writes each letter on one cardboard, and then hand out the cardboards to the children. After children being familiar with the pronunciation and the figure of the twenty-six letters, the teacher tells children: “[If] I call the letter in your hand, you should raise it up and say ‘here’.” In this way, children will pay attention on the pronunciation and the figure of the letters, and will not feel boring.

The following activities were recommended by Xu (2007): The first one is “wolf, wolf, what’s the time”. When they are teaching “what’s the time?” and its answers, teachers can use this game. In this game, one child play the role of wolf, and the others are rabbits. The rabbits jump around the wolf and ask “wolf, wolf, what’s the time?” The wolf answer “it’s...o’clock.” If the wolf’s answer is 12 o’clock, it starts to chase the rabbits. This game is very popular in Chinese kindergarten.

The second one is to make use of drawing in class. For example, when teachers are teaching the word “apple”, they can ask children to draw an apple in the air. When the teacher reads with a rising intonation, the students draw from the

bottom up; when the teacher reads with a falling intonation, the students draw from the top down. Most nouns can be taught in this way.

Thus, TPR activities are interesting, challenging and motivating, and almost all the students enjoy them. The use of TPR shows us fun way of teaching and learning English.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The reviewed studies show that TPR Method is an advanced, scientific and practical teaching method. It is different from and much more effective than the traditional grammatical or mechanical “read after me” teaching method. It is practical, because a large quantity of experiments show that TPR Method can really help the ESL teachers and learners.

It is well known that education in China has been influenced by the examination-oriented system for a long time. In a traditional passive class —teacher-centered class—the teachers explain every language point in detail, while students take notes all the time. This is more like an authoritative classroom. Even in the kindergarten or training school for young children, the most common way for teachers to teach is mechanically repeating teachers’ language. There is no opportunity for children to say and act, but only memorize. As the time pass, children’ learning interest in English is decreasing. The children become gradually bored by the inappropriate choice of teaching methods, and thus, some teachers fail to maintain the children’s interest. Einstein had said that interest is the best teacher. If children are interested in something, they will pay their attention and learn well and easily. So the activation of children interest is quite important for the present study. A good method is easy to motivate the children’s interest in learning. Total Physical Response as a new language teaching method is an effective way of English teaching. Compare with the teaching methods most Chinese ESL teachers are using present, TPR can do better

in encouraging learners to sustain their interest and attracting their attention for long. TPR also help the teacher to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. Moreover, TPR is an interesting and effective way to develop the intellect of children, especially young children.

As it was mentioned before, Shichida and Hart's theory about the brain development of children provides scientific basis for TPR Method. Recently researchers have noted the critical role of right brain in the learning process. TPR teaching method is a typically right-brain method, for children use a lot of body movement and direct feeling in it.

Based on the findings above, it can be inferred that TPR can contribute much to Chinese ESL education, if experts and teachers adopt it properly.

However, TPR has its limitations. First, to my point of view, adopting TPR teaching method requires more of the teacher than adopting traditional method. It needs teachers to be patient, energetic and enthusiastic. The teacher should lead students to do the action rather than stand in front of the blackboard and just talk, so he needs energy. He needs enthusiasm because if he is not creative and active enough, children will be tired by the repetitive practice. Second, TPR is not very effective in big class. This method works on the base of practice of giving commands and showing response. If there are too many students in one class, it will be hard for the teacher to guarantee that every child gets enough practice. Thus, I suggest dividing students into classes with no more than ten students in each. Last but not least, TPR works well with imperative instructions and vocabulary, but it may not function well

with more complex grammar. In other words, teachers may feel that TPR is best suited for beginning language learners, but most of the teachers feel restricted by TPR once their students approach an intermediate level of proficiency. To solve this problem, I recommend the teaching method of TPRS, which is developed on the base of TPR. According to Sebelius (2002), there are mainly three steps of adopting TPRS. First, the teacher teaches new vocabulary words through traditional TPR. Second, the teacher tells short stories which are full of repetitions of the new words. Third, students act out the stories, answer questions about them, revise them, or retell them.

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