

USING THE TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE METHOD IN THE CHINESE LOWER
ELEMENTARY ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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After tapping out the last character and re-reading the long unfamiliar words from the beginning in detail, I was struck by a number of feelings. Though there is nothing in it that is particularly fruitful to brag about, it is invaluable to me. It is the result of countless teachings, love and help.

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Abstract

USING THE TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE METHOD IN THE CHINESE LOWER ELEMENTARY ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Laura Anderson

According to Chen (2021), “total physical response (TPR) is a teaching method whose main purpose is to help students deepen their knowledge by allowing them to complete learning tasks while performing actions” (p. 53). Compared with traditional teaching, research suggests that the application of the TPR teaching method in primary school English teaching can improve student learning and increase participation and engagement in the classroom.

Research into the use of TPR has led to several conclusions. First, the TPR teaching method can help students learn vocabulary well and improve their performance. Second, TPR can reduce students' stress in the classroom and increase their interest in learning. Third, using TPR can increase student interaction and peer cooperation in the classroom so that students can fully participate in the class. Fourth, the TPR teaching method can be combined with other teaching methods or teaching techniques to make innovations that are more suitable for the classroom and students.

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Chapter I Introduction

The total physical response (TPR) teaching method, by which the teacher gives commands to the students in the target language through body movements and the students respond through whole body movements, has been recognized as an effective English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching method in Chinese lower primary English classrooms. As Chen (2021) notes, “the application of the TPR teaching method in elementary school English teaching can help mobilize students' interest in learning, better meet students' learning needs, let students combine work and leisure, and get twice the result with half the effort” (p.53). However, there are still some problems in the actual application of the TPR teaching method in primary English classrooms.

Xie, R. (2021) points to problems that may arise in the use of TPR in the classroom, such as insufficient practice by students, not focusing on whether students understand, and a lack of communication between instructor and student. Therefore, teachers should study how to use the TPR teaching method more effectively in primary English classrooms in China.

The global influence of the English language is increasing day by day, and young students in China are demanding higher levels of English proficiency. However, traditional teaching methods often focus on rote memorization and grammar exercises, which can be boring and less engaging for students. Therefore, primary English teachers might well consider the advantages and disadvantages of the current practical application of TPR pedagogy in the elementary English classroom to improve its use.

Statement of the Problem

This study will address the questions listed below.

1. How do teachers of English at the primary school level in China use TPR in

- the classroom?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using TPR in English classes for Chinese lower primary students?
 3. How can TPR be used more effectively in Chinese lower primary English classrooms?

Definition of Terms

“**Total physical response** (TPR) is a language teaching method built around the coordination of speech and action; it attempts to teach language through physical (motor) activity” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 73).

Wang et al. (2019) define **collaborative kinesthetic English learning** (CKEL) as a system “that can be used to integrate kinesthetic technology and collaborative learning in English language teaching by assisting students to form pairs in collaborative English language learning activities” (p. 745).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on language teaching methods specifically designed for teaching English at the lower primary level in China. By examining the strengths, challenges, and effectiveness of TPR pedagogy in this context, this study aims to provide some insights and recommendations for educators and researchers about improving the English language learning experience of lower elementary students in China.

Significance of the Study

The research on the application of the TPR teaching method in English classes in China at the primary school level is of significance because, at present, most teaching is still based on mechanical training, such as recitation and dictation, which makes a considerable number of

students lose their motivation to learn. Therefore, how to mobilize students' motivation to learn and make them "move" in the classroom has become a problem that needs to be addressed, and the TPR teaching method has a more obvious advantage in achieving this goal, so it is particularly important to study how to use the TPR teaching method in China's lower primary school English classrooms.

Delimitation of the Study

This research paper will investigate the use of TPR in teaching English at the first and second grades of elementary school in China. While the instruction of English begins in the third grade in some schools in China, this paper will consider the use of TPR in schools that begin teaching English in the first grade.

Methodology

This study will be based on library research and will focus on the theoretical background, content, strengths, and weaknesses of the TPR teaching method. The study will also summarize the current research on the use of this method in teaching English in China at the primary school level and present an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses as a pedagogical approach.

Chapter II Review of Literature

This chapter will be divided into four sections. In the first section, the definition of the total physical response (TPR) approach will be explained and the background of its application in the language classroom will be described. The second section will describe the advantages as well as the challenges of using the TPR approach in Chinese primary English classrooms. The third section will focus on how the TPR method can be more effectively applied in Chinese primary English classrooms. The last section will summarize the contents of this chapter.

Background of the Total Physical Response Method

The TPR approach emerged in the late 1960s and was proposed by the American psychologist James Asher. By 1969, he had designed and carried out more than 30 experiments to apply the TPR teaching method to the teaching of languages, such as Japanese and Russian. In this method, the teacher gives instructions in the target language, demonstrates the appropriate action, and instructs the students to do the same. From these experiments, Asher (1969) concluded that the learners' body movements are an important factor in learning and that understanding these movements can lead to a better acquisition of language.

At the end of the twentieth century, the TPR method was introduced into China, which aroused the great interest of Chinese scholars, and research on the TPR method gradually increased. Cui (1994) used the TPR method to teach English to primary and secondary school students and concluded that its use in the initial stage of English teaching can achieve good learning results. Zhang (2000), through a questionnaire survey and teaching practice, found that the TPR method broke with a more traditional teacher-centered approach and created an active classroom atmosphere that encouraged student participation. Pan (2002) used the method and found that TPR improved student listening skills.

The use of TPR has also led to the development of related approaches. For example, Ray & Seely (2008) created a teaching method based on TPR called total physical response storytelling (TPRS) that retained the physical elements of TPR but made them more descriptive and complex. In another development of TPR, Wang et al. (2019) proposed the integration of kinesthetic technology into TPR, which became the collaborative kinesthetic English learning (CKEL) approach. They found that students' vocabulary scores improved after using this method.

Advantages and Challenges of the Total Physical Response Method When Applied in English Classrooms in China

Many international scholars have researched TPR and affirmed its positive effects on language teaching, and teachers in many countries have used and developed it in the language classroom. The results of such research studies can be applied to English classrooms in China.

The research of Indonesian scholar Fahrurrozi (2017) confirmed that TPR does help students learn a second language, especially in teaching vocabulary. By collecting students' vocabulary scores over two cycles (each cycle lasting about two months) and comparing them, Fahrurrozi (2017) found that students' vocabulary scores improved by 9.25% when using the TPR method compared to when not using the TPR method. His study showed that the use of TPR in the language classroom can improve students' comprehension of vocabulary. Additionally, Fahrurrozi (2017) demonstrated that students found that learning English through this method was more interesting.

Harisma & Simanjuntak (2021) conducted research through interviews and questionnaire collection about students' situation when memorizing vocabulary through the TPR teaching method. The data showed that 48.48% of the students who participated in the survey strongly

agreed with the teacher's use of TPR in the English classroom, 36.36% agreed, and only 15.15% disagreed with the teacher's use of TPR. They concluded that “the use of TPR pedagogy enables students to be more motivated to learn in a variety of ways, such as discussion or the use of vocabulary words to increase interaction” (p. 282).

A similar conclusion was reached by Yanuarita (2017), who stated that vocabulary learning in foreign language instruction is important for young learners. Students in the lower grades tend to get bored with learning vocabulary, which is most likely due to the teacher's teaching techniques. Yanuarita (2017) used two different ways to teach vocabulary: one was the TPR method, and the other group learned vocabulary using word lists. She chose two different classes of the same grade in a primary school to be taught using the TPR method and word lists. After three class sessions, she distributed test papers to the students of the two classes and found that the average score of the class using the TPR method was higher than that of the other class, demonstrating that the TPR method achieved more favorable results than using word lists to teach vocabulary.

The Chinese teacher Lv (2016) believed that teaching lower grades should take children's cognitive abilities into account, and she developed a study around the role that the TPR teaching method can play in primary English vocabulary learning. By distributing special vocabulary test papers and comparing the changes in test scores before and after using the TPR method in different classes, Lv (2016) found that the average score of the class using the TPR method was 9.2 points higher than that of the class not using the TPR method. She also found, by means of a questionnaire, that none of the 40 students surveyed disliked the TPR method and more than 90% thought that learning English vocabulary with the TPR method was very interesting.

There are also some shortcomings to the use of the TPR method. Through observation and interviews, Xie, R. (2021) found that some words and sentences are difficult to express in TPR and that teachers may have more difficulties in explaining some abstract concepts to students. Students' levels of English may vary, even in the same class, which leads to the possibility that the teacher's body language and the activities presented may only be understood by some of the students. Zhou (2021) concluded that, due to the active nature of primary school children, if TPR is used extensively in the classroom, the children may be too active, and it can be a challenge for the teacher to maintain order. Teachers may also aim only to get students to move and overemphasize physical exercises without considering whether students will use this knowledge in real life.

Kuo et al. (2014) argued that the TPR approach has the limitation that the teacher cannot attend to every student when the class size is very large. They proposed an approach that integrates “motion sensing technology” and “embodied cognitive theory” into the TPR method. This means that they used the Microsoft Kinect sensing device, which helped students to act out vocabulary words and also provided relevant pictures and videos. Learners worked at their own pace. Kuo et al. (2014) divided the students into two groups and taught them using their modified TPR method as well as the traditional TPR method. When they gave post-tests and delayed tests to the students in both groups, they found that the English vocabulary retention rate was higher in the class that used their modified TPR method.

The TPR teaching method has been recognized as an effective teaching method in English teaching, though it has some limitations. The next section will consider strategies to improve its use in primary classrooms in China.

Using the Total Physical Response Method More Effectively in Primary English Classrooms in China

In actual classroom teaching, teachers should consider using TPR in combination with other teaching techniques in order to improve the quality of English teaching in the lower elementary school. Xie, Y. (2021) stated that innovation in teaching methods is something that teachers should think about and that teachers “should apply the TPR teaching method scientifically in actual teaching and lay a solid foundation for students' good learning and development ” (p. 63). Xie, Y. (2021) also stated that in order “to promote the improvement of classroom teaching, teachers should combine the TPR teaching method with students' learning characteristics in English classroom teaching in the lower primary school.” (p. 63). This means that teachers have to take into account the students' learning situation and age. For example, Chinese lower primary school students, who are only about six or seven years old, often have little knowledge of English and are lively and active, so when teachers teach words and phrases, they should insert songs or pictures into the lessons. Chen (2021) noted that teachers could “combine the teaching content with games in order to dramatically mobilize the students' interest in learning, increase their enthusiasm for English learning and focus their attention” (p. 54). Wang (2008) suggested that teachers could allow students to play roles in activities in order to reinforce the memory of the words and phrases through the use of body and language in authentic situations.

In addition, teachers can make clever use of teaching cards and reinforce movement demonstrations (Chen, 2021). Teaching cards can facilitate students' co-operation with each other to complete learning tasks. The teacher’s demonstration is also very important, providing guidance to students on imitation of the action and repetition of the vocabulary.

Guan (2021) suggested that teachers should provide students with visual aids, such as pictures or objects, when teaching with the TPR approach, so that students could remember the material taught through association with real-life experiences, rather than relying on verbal descriptions only. She also suggested that videos in English can be helpful because the images presented reinforce vocabulary and language concepts. With the support of this material, students are more likely to imitate the language they are learning and are more motivated to engage in the TPR approach of listening and speaking.

Summary

To summarize, the use of TPR can help students improve their vocabulary learning performance and enhance their learning of English in a more engaging classroom environment. In implementing TPR, teachers should be careful to provide students with age-appropriate materials and avoid the overuse of physical movements and gestures. In order to successfully implement the TPR teaching method, teachers need to consider the age of the students when designing lessons and activities that follow the TPR model. In addition, teachers should also consider combining TPR with games and real-life scenarios to increase students' interest in learning.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The total physical response (TPR) method involves learning language through body movement and sound to help students better understand and master language knowledge. The TPR teaching method can help students learn vocabulary well, and many studies show that students' performance improves after learning vocabulary with the TPR teaching method because of the active nature of the approach. Moreover, because the TPR method encourages students to listen more and move more, the classroom atmosphere is relaxed, and students may feel less pressure to learn English, which enhances their interest in learning. The use of the TPR teaching method can also increase student interaction and peer co-operation in the classroom.

There are some issues to consider in the implementation of the TPR teaching method. Teachers may not be able to provide individual attention or accommodate different learning levels. In addition, some teachers may put too much emphasis on physical gestures when implementing the TPR teaching method and neglect to create authentic contexts for students in the process. Some abstract content may be difficult for the teacher to show with the TPR teaching method. Moreover, the use of the TPR teaching method also puts demands on teachers' ability to control larger classes and design TPR lessons for such classes.

Recommendations

When implementing the TPR teaching method, teachers can consider using some strategies to make it more efficient. Researchers have suggested using games as part of TPR lessons. TPR can also be combined with vocabulary teaching; teachers can make full use of body language to demonstrate new vocabulary to the students, so that they can understand and remember the language through the imitation of body movements.

In addition, some researchers have suggested that teachers should consider the students' learning situation when designing the TPR classroom, which could mean the addition of songs or pictures for primary school student lessons. Other researchers have noted that teachers can include real-life scenarios and role-play activities, which may improve vocabulary acquisition. Teachers could also make use of props and tools, such as teaching cards, when using TPR pedagogy. Incorporating technology, such as videos, into TPR lessons can also stimulate students' interest in learning, attract their attention and assist them in understanding and retaining language. Instead of relying on abstract teaching methods such as verbal descriptions, teachers should use more visual aids, such as pictures or objects, with the TPR approach to help students learn the language through real-life experiences.

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