

A Review of Total Physical Response

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Abstract

This thesis briefly introduces Total Physical Response (TPR), a language teaching method that is adopted widely. The thesis includes the introduction, theoretical basis of TPR as well as the summary of relevant studies about TPR at home and abroad. In the end, the author offers some comment on this method so that this teaching method can be utilized effectively to contribute to language teaching.

Keywords

Total Physical Response; language teaching; language teaching method

1. Introduction

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a language teaching method that emphasizes physical movement and action in the learning process (Asher, 1969). Since it was proposed in the 1960s, this method has been widely used in early childhood language education, and it is also used in special education settings to help students with learning disabilities or autism learn language and communication skills. TPR advocates the integration of language learning with physical actions, allowing learners to respond physically to language instructions. This method is based on the idea that children learn language best through active participation and engagement with the material. In a TPR classroom, teachers give commands or instructions in the target language, and students respond by performing the corresponding actions (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

2. Theoretical Basis

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), TPR is linked to the “trace theory” of psychology, which holds that more often or the more intensively a memory connection is traced, the stronger the memory association will be and the more likely it will be recalled. Tracing can be done verbally (e.g. by rote repetition) and in association with motor activity. Combined tracing activities, such as verbal rehearsal accompanied by motor activities, hence increase the probability of successful recall.

As for theory of language, TPR seems to be based on structuralism or grammar-based view of language. Asher (1972) states that most of the grammatical structure of the target language and hundreds of vocabulary items can be learned from the skillful use of the imperative by the instructor. He also sees language as being composed of abstractions and non-abstractions, the latter being most specifically represented by concrete nouns and imperative verbs, by which learners can acquire a “detailed cognitive map”.

As for theory of learning, behavioral psychology lays foundation for TPR. The Sv-R (verbal stimulus-response) principle involves touching, grasping or manipulating. And Sv-R learning represents the simplest form of verbal behavior (DeCecco, 1968).

3. Recent Studies of TPR

Define abbreviations and acronyms the first time they are used in the text, even after they have been defined in the abstract. Abbreviations such as IEEE, SI, MKS, CGS, sc, dc, and rms do not have to be defined. Do not use abbreviations in the title or heads unless they are unavoidable.

3.1. Domestic Research on TPR

In China, TPR has gained increasing attention in recent years as a teaching method for English language learning. Researchers have explored its application in various educational settings, including primary schools, middle schools, and online learning environments.

Chen Ting (2022) discusses the application of TPR in primary school English teaching. She argues that TPR effectively engages students through physical activities and promotes their active participation in language learning. The findings are consistent with Liu and Luo (2021).

As for English teaching in middle schools, Xiao Xiyi (2022) conducted a study on the impact of TPR on junior high school students’ oral English performance in her master’s thesis. Her findings suggest that TPR significantly improves students’ oral proficiency and communication skills.

Meanwhile, Du Xiaomei (2022) discusses the TPR teaching method in online Chinese teaching from the aspects of case comparison, classroom observation and teaching test. The research results shows that TPR is highly effective and feasible in online Chinese teaching.

3.2. International Research on TPR

Internationally, TPR has been widely studied and applied in language teaching contexts. Researchers have examined its effectiveness in diverse settings, shedding light on the implementation of TPR in language teaching.

In terms of vocabulary teaching, Arlette J. (2020) conducts a study of teaching English vocabulary through TPR. The results obtained show that TPR allows students to learn faster and easier, since children find support from the physical representation of their facilitator or their peers. Later, Hue Nguyen (2022) investigate elementary students’ atti-

tudes toward teaching and learning English vocabulary through Total Physical Response. The results revealed that the elementary students had positive attitudes toward the use of TPR in vocabulary teaching and learning.

As for ESL, Yang (2024) explores the integration of songs and Total Physical Response (TPR) in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to young learners, claiming that the combined use of songs and TPR creates an active and stress-free classroom environment, maximizing children's cognitive development and effectively facilitating the acquisition of action vocabularies in ESL classrooms.

With regard to preschool English teaching, Duan (2021) proposes that this method can not only help children understand the new language quickly and gain long-term memory, but also allow children to learn English happily in a “zero stress” environment.

3.3 Summary

Research has shown that TPR is an effective language teaching method for students, especially for young children. It helps students develop language production skills. However, the effectiveness of TPR may vary depending on the age, ability, and cultural background of the students. In conclusion, TPR is a valuable teaching method that can help younger learners learn language through active participation and engagement. However, teachers need to be aware of its limitations and adapt it to the specific needs and abilities of their students.

4. Comments

4.1 Advantages

Generally speaking, TPR is an effective teaching method in language teaching classroom. It can enhance language learning through physical movement and activity. It has numerous benefits for students, from improved memory retention to increased engagement and comprehension. The advantages of TPR are as follows.

Engaging and Fun: TPR creates a lively and enjoyable learning environment. Students are actively involved in the lesson through physical activity, which makes the learning process more engaging and fun.

Improves Memory Retention: The combination of physical movement and language instruction in TPR helps students retain information better. By connecting language to physical actions, students are able to recall words and phrases more easily.

Promotes Comprehension: Through physical responses, students are able to demonstrate their understanding of the language, even when they are not yet able to produce it. This allows teachers to assess comprehension and provide appropriate feedback.

Supports Language Production: As students become more familiar with the language through physical actions, they are often better prepared to produce the language themselves, either orally or in writing.

4.2. Challenges and Considerations

While TPR has numerous advantages, there are also some challenges to consider. The

author's insights are as follows.

Limited Vocabulary: Early stages of TPR teaching focus primarily on simple commands and actions, which limits the vocabulary and language structures that students can learn.

Teacher-Centered: In a TPR classroom, the teacher often plays a dominant role, giving commands and instructions. This can limit opportunities for student-centered and collaborative learning. Additionally, TPR requires a significant amount of preparation and planning to ensure that activities are age-appropriate and engaging for students.

Cultural Sensitivity: While TPR is universal, teachers need to be sensitive to cultural differences and avoid using actions or commands that may be inappropriate or offensive in a particular culture.

Thus, it's important to note that TPR may not be suitable for all learning contexts or age groups. It requires a certain level of energy and engagement from both teachers and students, which may not always be feasible in larger classrooms or with older learners.

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