

A Review of Total Physical Response to Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Xiaolin Li

China West Normal University, Nan Chong 637001, China

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Abstract

The Total Physical Response (TPR) has been used as a second language teaching approach for many years, mainly in the English education of immigrant children in the United States at the beginning, and then it was introduced to China after the 20th century. In the early days, it was basically used in primary schools, but later more and more teachers in the field of elementary education began to pay attention to it and tried it gradually. This paper describes the relevant studies of the whole-body response method at home and abroad, and evaluates its advantages and disadvantages as well as some of the authors' thoughts.

Keywords

Total Physical Response; English teaching; review; English as foreign language

1. Introduction

Both theoreticians and practitioners in the field of foreign language teaching have always been interested in finding the most efficient, quickest and easiest approach to the acquisition and learning of the foreign language, so the history of foreign language teaching is paved with a plethora of approaches that have yielded greater or smaller success, depending on the target group and the level of proficiency that learners were able to achieve. Furthermore, these approaches have relied on very different theoretical frameworks and assumptions, some of which maybe counter-intuitive when it comes to the functioning of the human brain and the naturalness of language acquisition in general. However, one of the methods of foreign language learning that did fall in line with both neurolinguistic principles and naturalness is called Total Physical Response and it will be the focus of this paper.

2. Literature Review

The Total Physical Response (TPR) method was proposed by James J. Asher, a famous American psychology professor in the 1960s (Asher, 1969). He carried out a large number of experiments on children's language teaching and combined the re-

search results of children's development, brain side theory, and second language acquisition theory. On this basis of these theories, Asher proposed a systemic reaction method before launching the Total Physical Response method. He took a large number of empirical studies of learning a second language, and he result proved that the TPR method was feasible for both adults and children in obtaining the second language (Asher, 1972). According to Asher's thoughts, once a foundation in listening comprehension has been established, the development of speech would be naturally occurring without any efforts. TPR followed the learner's natural process of language learning, which made learning easier and more effective by not forcing students to speak in a target language they are not yet familiar with (Asher, 1981).

In addition to Asher, there are many studies that show the importance of TPR for children's language acquisition. Piaget (1981) suggests that children can perceive the world by touching, listening and seeing before language skills are formed. Ellis, R (1994) argues that the Total Physical Response is an effective and appropriate method for beginners in language. He states that the success of this method is based on the format of the classroom activity in which students respond to the teacher's instructions through body movements. Gardner (1999), on the other hand, argues that students learn better when they receive instructions that stimulate different aspects and forms of intellectual development.

As the superiority of TPR has been proved, more and more Chinese researchers are paying attention to this field. Yu (1999) has written an article titled Asher Second Language Acquisition View and TPR Teaching Methods, which explored the characteristics and advantages of TPR teaching. In the acquisition of a second language, he summarized that the second language acquisition strategy was an active action response in essence. Liu and Sha (2004) discussed the application of the TPR method in children's English acquisition in China. They believed that the TPR method conformed to the physical and psychological characteristics of children. Wang (2008) proposed that the TPR method was a foreign language teaching method suitable for children. Rong (2021) tried to investigate the effectiveness of TPR for young learners through the case study of two teachers, and his observations showed that TPR technology is a good method based on games, role-playing, and body movements. The study also found that traditional teaching methods face challenges to TPR in practice.

3. Comments and Views on Total Physical Response

TPR seems to work effectively for children and adults. There is no age barrier. The only caveat is that if the language training starts after puberty, the probability is almost certain that students will have at least some accent in speaking the second language, no matter how many years they learn the foreign language or live in the foreign country (Savić, 2014).

From most Chinese people's learning experiences, they have put lots of efforts to

learn English, but still master mute English. In the modern education reform, teachers are called to try to create a relaxed, democratic and harmonious atmosphere for teaching in English teaching. TPR, as a member of humanistic teaching method, is just able to fulfill these new demands.

The Total Physical Response, as effective teaching, is worthy of promotion and application for preschool English teaching in the future. Firstly, the TPR method is a rich and interesting teaching form, which can not only attract the attention of children but also can improve their enthusiasm for learning a foreign language. According to Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development of children, teachers should provide children with various sensory stimulations when they carry out activities of English teaching (Piaget, 1981). The TPR method advocates that learners should link language and behavior together when they learn the language. When teachers teach verbs like walking, running, jump, etc., they can make children understand the meaning of these words by speaking and acting. Therefore, the TPR method is very suitable for children's characteristics. Secondly, the TPR method paid little attention to children's mistakes in their learning process. It can create a relaxed and happy atmosphere in the classroom, which makes it easy for children to eliminate tension. So, it is helpful to help students eliminate fear and nervousness and enable students to learn in a zero-stress environment. Finally, the TPR method provides a learning environment that is closely related to real-life so that they can learn a foreign language in a variety of activities and apply what they learned. As we all know, preschool children are at the age of 3 to 6 stages in the critical period of language development, so their parents and teacher should grasp the critical period and make full use of the advantage of TPR to promote the improvement of English ability.

However, every coin has two sides, and the TPR method is no exception. The abstract words and sentences are hard to express in the TPR method. To improve learning efficiency and learners' satisfaction, the user needs to be organically combined with other teaching methods. The TPR method requires the teacher to have high professional quality and comprehensive ability, including language expression ability, body coordination ability, artistic talent, and so on. Class sizes in our country are large, and the number of students is high. Compared with small class teaching in the West, the problem of discipline cannot be ignored. As teachers will design some games and performance activities, such as role-playing, inter-group competitions, etc. in TPR teaching, they need to have strong classroom management skills. Under a sound classroom management model, TPR can be truly effective, or else the teaching will be out of control, thus failing to achieve the expected teaching results. Therefore, when teachers use the TPR method in practice, they must strengthen the training of professional skills and improve their knowledge and accomplishment. To sum up, different methods have their unique characteristics. According to the different needs of children, teachers should choose a more suitable method for children, especially the Total Physical Response method.

So, if acquisition is to occur, the key is varied and comprehensible input, but even this is not enough to guarantee success. In addition to a variety of personal, environmental and institutional factors that can influence the outcome of foreign language learning, we have to take into consideration the methods and approaches utilized.

4. Conclusion

Having demonstrated in this paper both good and bad sides of TPR, we can say that it should be an inevitable, but still not an exclusive part of the foreign language teaching methodology and that its application should be well-timed and well-planned. The Total Physical Response was initially created as a supplementary teaching method that should be used in conjunction with other effective teaching methods in order to accomplish task better. Therefore, it must be used flexibly to make English teaching diversified, localized and student-centered.

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