

A review of the Total Physical Response—a Foreign Language Teaching Methodology

Jie Zeng

School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, NanChong, China

Email: 1799661757@qq.com

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Abstract

The Total Physical Response (TPR) method, pioneered by psychologist James Asher in the 1960s, has revolutionized the way we approach language learning, especially for young learners. This innovative method focuses on integrating physical actions with linguistic input, fostering a natural and intuitive approach to language acquisition. In this thesis, the theoretical foundations and practical implications of TPR have been delved into, and some insights have been drawn from various scholars who have contributed significantly to its development and application.

Keywords

Total Physical Response; Language teaching method; Review

1. Introduction

The Total Physical Response (TPR) is a teaching method that was proposed by American psychology professor James Asher in his book "Learning Another Language Through Actions" in the 1960s. It is a language teaching method that based on the coordination of speech and action, primarily utilizing physical activities to teach language. It advocates connecting language with behavior. The TPR method is grounded in the theory of children acquiring their first language and is one of the most representative and influential approaches within the "comprehension approach."

2. Theoretical Basis

Based on his research of how children learn their native language, Asher observed that the most significant characteristic of children learning language is that comprehension precedes speech, and comprehension is manifested in responding to instructions through actions. Asher used the example of parents teaching young children their first language to illustrate the principles of Total Physical Response (TPR) teaching method. After conducting numerous in-depth and detailed practical obser-

vations, he proposed the theory of Total Physical Response teaching.

From the perspective of learning theory, Asher believes that the process of adults learning a foreign language is similar to how children acquire their native language. The process of foreign language teaching and learning should reflect the natural acquisition process of learning a mother tongue. Asher further supported his views using the theory of brain lateralization. He argued that language learning activities are concentrated in the right brain, which is primarily concerned with image thinking. Children learn language through physical activities—a right-brain activity. When a certain amount of learning has occurred in the right brain, the left brain is stimulated to produce language or more abstract linguistic processes. Asher also borrowed from the opinions for emotional factors in humanistic teaching methods. Humanistic teaching methods believe that the key condition for successful language learning is to reduce learners' stress and anxiety. Learning language in a relaxed and enjoyable language environment can effectively increase learners' interest and motivation, promoting English learning. In the process of language teaching, it is emphasized that learners explain meaning through actions rather than studying abstract linguistic forms.

The theoretical foundation of the Total Physical Response teaching method is structural linguistics and behaviorist psychology.

3. Definition and Characteristics of Total Physical Response (TPR)

Total Physical Response (TPR), pioneered by Dr. James J. Asher, a professor of psychology at the University of San Jose, California, aims to facilitate learners in acquiring a second or foreign language naturally and efficiently. It is judged as one of the methods which the principles of the Comprehension Approach, a general language approach to foreign language instruction emphasizing listening comprehension, put into practice (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Asher contended that second language teaching and learning should mimic the process of first language development by prioritizing listening comprehension in the initial stages and utilizing physical movement as a response to verbal input. This approach aims to reduce learners' inhibition and lower their affective filter. Consequently, Asher (1977) defined TPR as a teaching method that deals with "the coordination of speech and action" or, more specifically, a language teaching approach that utilizes physical movement as a response to speech.

Regarding the unique characteristics of TPR, Richards and Rodgers (1999) highlighted several key aspects: Firstly, a classroom filled with movement and imperative drills is a distinctive feature of the TPR method. Secondly, TPR is grounded in the model of how children acquire their native language. Thirdly, through the employment of various physical activities, TPR reduces inhibitions and lowers affective filters among young learners (Richards & Rodgers, 1999). Lastly, TPR focuses on

meaning rather than the formal structure of linguistic items, and grammar is taught inductively (Richards & Rodgers, 1999).

4. Domestic Researches of Total Physical Response (TPR)

The Total Physical Response (TPR) method was introduced to China in the late 20th century. Based on foreign research on TPR, domestic studies mainly focus on two aspects: One is to investigate the application of TPR in English teaching in primary and secondary schools. The other is to research the use of TPR in teaching Chinese as a second language to language learners.

There are also numerous domestic studies on the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, which mainly focus on English classrooms in primary and secondary schools. For instance, Wang Chunfen's research proposed that TPR can be described as a "teaching method that brings language to life," combining teaching with activities to make it easier for beginners to grasp and apply language. Using this teaching method in class can deepen students' memory of knowledge. Meanwhile, TPR can also make learners more confident in language learning. However, this study lacks research on older students.

Wang Li compared traditional English teaching methods with TPR and clarified its advantages. She also combined the teaching modes of TPR in early childhood English teaching with vocabulary teaching, game-based learning, drawing, music, and situational teaching. By analyzing and applying these modes, Wang took a significant step from theory to practice.

Mo Linyan (2008) also conducted research on TPR, arguing that it requires students to move their bodies. Teachers assist students in understanding the meaning of instructions through actions, enabling them to respond and improve learning outcomes. Mo concluded that, due to the ability to extrapolate from instructions and practice more sentences, students not only grasp basic knowledge but also acquire more grammar and vocabulary. However, this study lacks specific teaching measures and cannot provide actionable suggestions for teaching.

Imperative sentence practice is a major classroom activity in TPR. Li Heng (2012) pointed out in her research that TPR is a complex teaching activity, requiring teachers to understand the actual situation of different class students and create different instructions that are suitable for students' learning conditions to make them easier for children to understand and accept. However, this study lacks research and analysis of specific teaching examples.

Gao Ge and Gao Lixin (2013) noted that TPR is a teaching method combined with psychology, enabling students to increase visual stimulation through activities. During the process of receiving stimulation, students form unintentional and image memory, grasp knowledge that needs to be memorized through games, and fully exert the leading role of teachers and the subject role of students. This study provides specific classroom examples, which are beneficial for other teachers as teaching ref-

erences.

Meanwhile, while pointing out the advantages of TPR, domestic scholars have also emphasized some issues in its implementation. For example, Hu Tieqiu (2000) pointed out in "TPR - A Worthy New Foreign Language Teaching Method" that using TPR alone in foreign language teaching makes it difficult to test learners' learning outcomes, and teachers' grammar and vocabulary explanations are not systematic enough. Therefore, TPR should be combined with traditional teaching methods. This study also proposed that TPR teaching methods should be combined with other teaching methods to improve learning efficiency.

Wang Yiming (2004) and Zhang Qin (2006) share the same view, arguing that TPR should not be used alone in foreign language teaching activities and that it needs to be combined with other teaching methods to achieve ideal teaching effects. However, this study lacks specific measures, such as how to integrate new and old teaching methods.

With the development of teaching Chinese as a second language, research on TPR for Chinese as a second language is increasing. Chen Xuanyi (2013) analyzed the current overseas research and promotion of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, combined with research on teaching Chinese to children in the Philippines, providing more targeted teaching methods. The research methods in this paper are comprehensive, covering related theories of TPR in physiology, psychology, and linguistics, and providing specific practical guidance for teaching Chinese to children as a foreign language, which has certain practical significance. It is conducive to international Chinese teachers in Southeast Asia adjusting classroom activities and class settings.

Wei Wei (2014) first analyzed the theoretical basis of TPR from a biological perspective, and creatively conducted classroom observations and reflections, which were different from previous studies. Through examples, Wei illustrated that TPR focuses more on the meaning of language than on its form itself, reflecting the autonomy of students' learning. Attention should also be paid to the limitations of TPR, such as focusing on students' ideas at the beginning stage, encouraging them while ignoring learners' language errors. However, there is a lack of research on teachers.

5. Foreign Researches of Total Physical Response (TPR)

Since Asher proposed the Total Physical Response (TPR) theory, many researchers have begun to experiment with this method. Yoriaki (1984) argued that learners should not completely prioritize listening and postpone speaking, and that there were still many details in the TPR theory that needed to be refined, thus Yoriaki held a skeptical attitude.

Japanese scholar Sano Masayuki (1989) applied TPR in English teaching in Japanese middle schools. They added 15-16 hours of TPR teaching to the initial stage of English classes at Yamagata University Affiliated Middle School. After the experiment,

tests showed that students' scores had generally improved significantly, so he believed that the TPR teaching method was worth exploring. It is worth mentioning that Sano Masayuki's experiment was conducted in the early stages of English learning, and when grammar learning began later, this method was no longer applicable.

After the 21st century, many scholars have continued to experiment with the TPR teaching method. Adnan Oflaz (2019) believes that in second language learning, there are many factors that can affect learners' oral development, and learners' anxiety is one of the important reasons. Adnan believes that using the Total Physical Response method can reduce learners' anxiety. Adnan selected 61 German learners as the research subjects. The experiment lasted six weeks, with two hours of class per week using the Total Physical Response method. The final conclusion was that in the Total Physical Response classroom, students were more willing to speak German rather than English. In general, the subjects of these two experiments were relatively young and were in the early stages of learning, and the conclusions were that the Total Physical Response method was relatively suitable.

Semarang (2019) adopted a case study method, selecting two English instructors who used the Total Physical Response method as the subjects of investigation. Data were collected through 14 classroom observations, interviews, and surveys, and were analyzed accordingly. This study took a different approach from previous studies, as most previous papers selected learners as the research subjects, while this paper selected teachers as the research subjects and conducted a realistic evaluation from various aspects of teachers, thereby putting forward some specific and targeted questions. Semarang believes that in the process of teaching speaking, teachers should pay attention to meaningful learning content beforehand and conduct meaningful evaluations.

Nguyen Thi Thanh Hue (2022) attempts to investigate elementary students' attitudes toward teaching and learning English vocabulary through Total Physical Response. It involved a class with 40 elementary students in the fourth grade at Nguyen Khuyen primary school in Bien Hoa City. Through semi-structured interviews and classroom observation, it is revealed that the elementary students had positive attitudes toward the use of TPR in vocabulary teaching and learning. This study is expected to shed light on the implementation of teaching vocabulary methods in the Nguyen Khuyen primary school context and other similar contexts.

Many scholars have also commented on the Total Physical Response method from various perspectives. Sühendan Er. (2013) believes that the Total Physical Response method is the most appropriate teaching method for children learning a second language in their early years. The forms adopted in the TPR theory, such as songs, stories, and games, are suitable for young children and can better attract their attention.

In summary, since Asher proposed the concept of the Total Physical Response

method, there have been many scholars abroad who have conducted research on it. Through these studies, it can be proven that at least the Total Physical Response method has many merits in the early stages of teaching, thus it has been widely spread around the world.

6. Reflections on the Total Physical Response (TPR)

6.1 Advantages of TPR

Based on the former studies at home and abroad, it is revealed that the TPR has both its merits and shortcomings.

In terms of its advantage, the Total Physical Response (TPR) method allows students to prioritize the development of comprehension skills, that is, the ability to "listen," in the process of second language acquisition. After attaining a certain level of comprehension ability, they then proceed to expressing themselves, namely, the ability to "speak." Therefore, the TPR method is highly suitable for second language learners at the beginner stage. Classes adopting the TPR method are lively, with students actively participating in class activities and cooperating with the teacher's teaching tasks. This teaching method that combines bodily movements can effectively attract their interest in participating in activities, provide a learning environment that is closer to real life, and allow students to learn the language through immersive experiences. To a certain extent, it reduces students' concerns and pressure in learning a foreign language, extending the duration of their attention in learning. When organizing classroom teaching with the TPR method, teachers will focus on training students' practical language communication skills, without having to spend a lot of time analyzing abstract concepts such as sentence structure and grammatical structure. This achieves teaching effect and improves classroom efficiency. Starting from teacher-student interaction, this teaching method utilizes the teacher's body movements to help learners identify and grasp the target language. It advocates the use of phrases and sentences as teaching units, emphasizing whole-sentence learning and application, focusing on the content and meaning of the language, and is of great help in cultivating students' practical communication skills.

6.2 Disadvantages of TPR

However, TPR is not without disadvantages.

Firstly, the applicable group is limited. The Total Physical Response (TPR) method is mostly suitable for students at the elementary level. Senior students tend to show a sense of repulsion towards using body movements to learn knowledge, and are reluctant to follow or imitate the teacher's actions, leading to low classroom activity. Therefore, the TPR method is generally only suitable for beginners in lower grades. Before using this teaching method, teachers should consider the students' age and Chinese proficiency.

Secondly, the content that can be taught is limited. The TPR method requires combining with physical movements, which is only suitable for certain words and sentences that can be explained through body movements. The content learned is mostly quite simple. When it involves more complex vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, it becomes difficult to explain using this teaching method.

Thirdly, classroom discipline is difficult to control. Performing physical actions in the classroom using the TPR method may excite students' emotions. Some game sections, performance sections, etc., may cause students to forget to follow classroom rules, resulting in chaotic classroom order. If classroom management is not promptly implemented, it will be difficult to achieve good teaching effects.

Fourthly, the TPR teaching method neglects the training of reading and writing skills. When teachers use the TPR method to teach simple vocabulary and sentence patterns, they often only focus on students' comprehension and repetition abilities, namely listening and speaking skills, while ignoring the exercise of reading and writing abilities, which is not conducive to the comprehensive development of students' language skills.

Lastly, inappropriate use of teachers' body language can easily lead to cultural conflicts in teaching. Different countries, regions, and even ethnic groups may have different interpretations of the same body movement. If not taken into account, these differences will bring certain problems and troubles to classroom language teaching. For example, when teaching students to express agreement or affirmation, teachers may form a circle with their thumb and index finger, while straightening or slightly bending the other three fingers, which is the OK gesture. However, this gesture expresses different meanings in different countries. In conclusion, when using the TPR method for teaching, teachers should use body language carefully based on students' cultural backgrounds, pay attention to differences, and avoid causing misunderstandings in the classroom as much as possible. It is best to explain with the help of certain scenarios.

7. Conclusion

Total Physical Response (TPR) method allows students to prioritize the development of comprehension skills and has proven to be several times more effective than traditional foreign language teaching methods, facilitating the development of "foreign language thinking." However, risking neglecting the training of reading and writing skills, the TPR has its limitations in expressing abstract concepts and complex grammatical structures, and thus is most suitable for language learning at the initial stages. Also, classroom discipline is difficult to control and inappropriate use of teachers' body language can easily lead to cultural conflicts in teaching.

In summary, TPR is a highly effective language teaching method that utilizes physical actions to facilitate language acquisition and mirroring the process of native language acquisition. Its focus on listening comprehension, anxiety reduction, and

the involvement of both hemispheres of the brain makes it an appealing approach for language learners. But TPR can not always be so efficient ,thus, in order to achieve proficiency, TPR should be combined with other teaching methods.

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