

The Application of TPR in Primary School English Teaching

Jingwen Li

China West Normal University, Nanchong, Sichuan, China

Abstract

Initiated by James Asher in 1960s, based on memory trace theory, humanistic psychology and children's first language acquisition, total physical response is a language teaching method built around the coordination of speech and act. The main teaching actions are to issue commands by teachers and to respond by children. A TPR class has its features: (1) Teachers and children play different roles; (2) Much application of imperative; (3) Mistakes and errors can be tolerated. Teachers should try to engage children's bodies, senses and imagination in a TPR class. TPR is good for English learning and teaching. The application of TPR will create a safe learning environment for children, activate their learning interest. However, it's not perfect. It is not suitable for all contents and all ages, and sometimes it may cause disciplinary problems.

Keywords

Total Physical Response; Primary School English Teaching; Teaching Methods.

1. Introduction

The deepening of reform and opening up and rapid economic development encourage the learning of English. Nowadays, many students begin to learn English in kindergartens. Besides it, there are many children's after-school tutoring aiming to teach young students English. This phenomenon pushes children English teaching to meet higher requirements. However, by consulting CNKI, the writer found that children English learning and teaching received the lowest attention.

Total Physical Response is initiated by James Asher in 1960s, whose general objective is to teach oral proficiency at a beginning level and ultimate goal is to teach basic speaking skills. Masayuki Sano (1989) once did a research to arrive the conclusion:(1) the application of TPR improves children's English learning; (2) children's motivation on English learning has been arisen. Masayuki's research confirmed that TPR is beneficial for children's English learning.

2. Definition of TPR

In 1965, Noam Chomsky claimed that human beings have an inborn language acquisition device which covers the common phenomenon in all languages. After that, many scholars recorded the process of children language acquisition with cameras and recording pens to figure out the secret of children language acquisition. In late 1960s, James Asher built a teaching method----total physical response. Total physical response is a language teaching method built around the coordination of speech and act. The main teaching actions are to issue commands by teachers and to respond by children. The class will process as the following way:

- ①Review.
- ②New commands.
- ③Role Rehearsal.
- ④Reading and writing.

(Asher 1977:54-56).

3. Theoretical Basis

TPR teaching method is a scientific teaching method, which is based on psychology, linguistics and pedagogy.

3.1. Psychology

According to the memory trace theory, repeated input of a language signal many times makes it engraved in the brain, the more frequent and intense the memory, the easier the association and recall. Practice with physical activity increases the likelihood of successful recall. Repeated practice leads to a transition from conscious to unconscious behavior. The TPR teaching emphasizes the repetition of language and actions. With much practice, students will acquire the language and lay solid foundation for future output.

Humanistic psychology attaches importance to emotional factors in learning, and believes that students learn best in a more relaxed environment. Teachers should try their best to create conditions to overcome potential obstacles in language learning, cultivate pleasant learning emotions and improve learning efficiency (Diane,2000). In TPR teaching, the atmosphere is free of stress, where students feel secure.

3.2. Linguistics

What's more, TPR imitates children's first language acquisition. Many evidences show that shortly after birth, young children will start first language acquisition. In 1-2 years old, they mainly acquire the language through listening and observation, and they can't speak. Gradually, they can say some easy words. They respond the adults' actions usually with an action response and a verbal one following (Zhang Guanhong, 2000). In TPR, students suffer from listening, observing to acting and then speaking. The process is similar to first language acquisition.

4. Features of TPR

4.1. Different Roles in TPR

In TPR, teachers and learners play different roles. Learners in total physical response have the primary roles of listener and performer. Learners listen to teachers' commands and observe actions. Teachers play an active and direct role in TPR. They decide what to teach, who models and presents the new materials. At beginning, there is no teaching text, teachers' voices, gestures and actions are teaching content. Later, teachers will choose some common classroom teaching material to support teaching points, like pictures and slides. By the way, Asher had developed TPR student kits that focus on specific situations, such as at home, the supermarket.

4.2. Much Application of Imperative

In a TPR class, imperative sentences are mainly practiced. Teachers design the content as a series of command language items, and then ask students to respond physically to these items. Take the case of teaching words about body and some verbs as an example. At first, the teacher can point his own face and say "a face". And he will point his own face and say "Touch my face". Teachers use the imperative sentences to help students not only learn the words about body, but also acquire some useful words like touch, raise, which can be used with the words about body.

4.3. Fault-tolerant Teaching

In traditional English classroom, teachers treat children's mistakes and errors seriously, which will destroy children's confidence in English learning and increase their anxiety of speaking English. In TPR, teachers treat children's mistakes or errors generously. Krashen and Terrel

(1983) stated that teachers shouldn't give much consideration on error correction in any phase of children's language development. In TPR, students are in a stress-free environment, where the influence of emotional filter is very low.

5. Application of TPR in Primary School English Teaching

Guo xiaochun (2009) proposed a series of approaches to make the best advantage of TPR in primary school English teaching and learning, such as through actions, songs, games, drawing, playing and multimedia. Chen li (2022) said that teachers should unite students' body and mind, teach English through fun and create an authentic environment for students. Based on their ideas and the writer's own knowledge, the thesis will show three common approaches to apply TPR effectively in primary school English teaching.

5.1. Engage Children's Bodies

Total physical response is a language teaching method built around the coordination of speech and action. It requires teachers to mobilize students' bodies. Students use their bodies to fulfill some commands by teachers. For example, when teaching some verbs like touch, beat etc., teachers can make some commands such as "touch your face" and "beat your bag". Through listening, observing and acting, students will grasp these words quickly. Sometimes, students are very lazy and unwilling to act. Teachers can use some competitive games. If the student does that correctly, he will get one point. Students who get the most points will become the winner and receive some awards. The term is called total physical response. Lack of engaging children's bodies, that TPR class must be a failure.

5.2. Engage Children's Senses

In TPR, it's better for teachers to engage children's basic senses, like seeing, hearing and touching. Teachers can use real objectives, pictures, songs etc. to engage students' senses. Language is abstract, but engaging students' senses can make language learning concrete and easier.

Take the seeing sense as an example. To engage students' seeing sense, the teacher should provide some visual aids. Visual aids are those things facilitating learning which can be seen by eyes, such as real objectives, audios and pictures. For children, real and concrete things are helpful for their English learning. When teaching some words about stationary, the teacher asks students to take out their bag, pencil, eraser etc. before class. At the beginning of the class, the teacher presents new teaching points with voices and actions, like "I touch my bag". And then he guides students to imitate these actions. After students have grasped them, he will require students to act on their own. The teacher can make instructions like "Touch your bag/pencil". With visual aids, children will be able to obtain these new words more effectively than without them.

5.3. Engage Children's Imagination

In a TPR class, imperative sentences by teachers are everywhere. It seems that teachers are the dominators in the class. It's not true that children have no room. After presenting and grasping, children can be organized to use their imagination. In a TPR class, imperative sentences by teachers are the dominators of the class and students are very inferior. Actually, it's not true. After the teacher guides children to imitate his voices and actions. Teachers can organize children to do some activities which are more motivated and need much imagination, such as drawing game and role play. Take drawing as an example. In the learning of prepositions, the teacher can ask children to work in pairs to play a drawing game. A plays a describer and he can describe things as he likes. B is the painter. A commands that drew a desk; a bag is under it; an apple is on it. B should follow A's instructions to draw the picture. After A finishes, B will

show A the original one. The activity not only activates children's imagination, but also increases children's learning interest.

6. Reflection on TPR

6.1. Advantages of TPR

Firstly, TPR has created a good English environment where children will feel a sense of security. There teachers provide many opportunities for children to acquire the language. What's more, teachers can tolerate students' mistakes or errors which greatly protect their English learning confidence.

Secondly, TPR can increase children's learning interest and motivate students. According to the research by Masayuki Sano (1989), more than 75% children liked TPR. Different from traditional English classroom where teachers pour knowledge into children's heads, in TPR class, teachers use colorful activities and create some authentic learning environment to guide students to learn from doing.

6.2. Disadvantages of TPR

Firstly, TPR can't be suitable for all contents, especially those abstract content. Using TPR to teach abstract words won't facilitate children's English learning, but may raise troubles for children.

Secondly, TPR can't be suitable for all ages. Because TPR is available for some easy vocabulary and structures, it is more suitable for the initial stage of language learning. Besides it, the instructions and actions are very easy, TPR can't lead to deeper learning and teaching.

Thirdly, it may cause some disciplinary problems. In a TPR class, children will often do activities like games, role play and competition. It's difficult for teachers to handle the discipline in a big class.

7. Summary

TPR is a teaching method which will engage students' multi-senses which will help develop children's overall competences. Teachers should update their teaching belief about TPR and improve their own knowledge abilities and teaching abilities to make the best use of TPR in future.

References

- [1] Asher, J. (1969). The total physical response technique learning. *The Journal of Special Education*, vol 3.
- [2] Asher, J. (1977). *Learning another language through actions: The complete teacher's guide book*. Los Gatos, Calif.: Sky Oaks Productions. (2nd ed. 1982).
- [3] Chen L. (2022). Application of Whole body response method in primary school English teaching. *Shanxi Education (Teaching)*(06),35-36.
- [4] Diane, L. F. & Michael, H. L. (1983). *An introduction to second language acquisition*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [5] Guo X. C. (2009). TPR teaching method and English teaching in China. *Journal of Guilin Teachers College* (01),112-115.
- [6] Gong X. L. (2011). *Application of Whole Body Response Method (TPR) in Children's English Teaching* (Master Dissertation, Central China Normal University).
- [7] Krashen, S. D.&Terrell, T. D. (1983). *Language in the classroom*. Old Tappan: Prentice Hall.
- [8] Liu F. (2018). Reflections on TPR teaching method in English classroom. *Education Modernization* (38),131-133+135.

- [9] Zhang Y. H. (2000). The application of "Whole body response method" in English teaching. Education Guide (05),21-23.
- [10] Sanneng Masue & Xiong X. L. (1989). How to incorporate the Whole Body Response Method into English Teaching. Foreign Language Teaching and Learning (01),35-40.