

A Comprehensive Review of Total Physical Response

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Abstract

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a teaching method proposed by American psychologist James Asher, which plays a significant role in foreign language teaching. This article mainly provides an overview of TPR. It then analyzes and summarizes its background, theoretical basis, implementation principles, and steps. It outlines the current research status of TPR and evaluates its advantages and disadvantages. Finally, the author discusses the challenges in implementing TPR in the future and provides an outlook on its future research directions in foreign language teaching.

Keywords

Total Physical Response; Overview; Current Status; Evaluations; Challenges and Trends.

1. Introduction

Language plays a crucial role in the development of both material and spiritual civilizations for human beings. As a mediator in translating language teaching into practical classrooms, language teaching methods have consistently garnered significant attention. With the progress of material development and the changes of human needs, the focus of language teaching methods has gradually shifted from efficiency to learners themselves. The prevalence of humanism has led to the growing popularity of teaching methodologies within the humanistic framework, among which Total Physical Response (TPR) stands as a notable example. Originating in the United States in the 1960s, Total Physical Response was proposed by James Asher, a psychologist from California. It is a language teaching method that integrates language learning with physical actions. Since its inception, Total Physical Response has been extensively applied in second language teaching and learning. In language teaching practice, Total Physical Response has been warmly welcomed by numerous teachers and students due to its quality of high participation, lively nature, and ability to capture students' attention. Even today, countless language educators continue to explore the application of Total Physical Response in language teaching and learning. To better incorporate this method into language instruction, it's essential to have a more comprehensive understanding of Total Physical Response's theoretical foundations, advantages, disadvantages and so on.

2. Overview of Total Physical Response

2.1. Introduction to Total Physical Response

Total Physical Response emerged in the 1960s, and it is a language teaching method proposed by the American psychologist James Asher who followed extensive experiments and observations. In an article published in 1969, Asher mentioned that the research on TPR began in 1963, aiming to enhance the speed of American children and adults in understanding Japanese (1). TPR advocates integrating language learning with physical actions. TPR is the supporter of teaching language through behavior and it emphasizes giving language instructions in authentic contexts. TPR underscores that in language teaching and learning, the development of students' listening skills should be prioritized, upon which other language

abilities can naturally develop. The introduction and development of TPR are founded on solid theoretical grounds, characterized by its high level of engagement and intuitiveness. It is a scientific language teaching method, particularly suitable for second language learners. TPR is seen as an excellent approach for second language acquisition.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations of Total Physical Response

2.2.1. The Physiological Basis of Total Physical Response

The physiological basis of Total Physical Response (TPR) lies in the theory of lateralization of brain functions, which was proposed by the American psychobiologist Roger Wolcott Sperry. Through experiments, he confirmed the division of labor in the brain, specifically that the human brain consists of two hemispheres. The left hemisphere is adept at logic, analysis, and language, while the right hemisphere is responsible for emotions and physical coordination. Asher believes that teaching language through actions is essentially a left-brain teaching strategy. The right hemisphere of the brain controls movement, while the left hemisphere of the brain controls language learning. When the right brain performs an action, the left brain is actually observing the right brain and constantly learning. From this perspective, the process of learners acquiring a second language is one of continuous interaction between the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Therefore, from this perspective, the theory of lateralization of brain functions serves as the biological theoretical foundation of TPR.

2.2.2. The Psychological Foundations of Total Physical Response

The psychological foundation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method lies in the behaviorist theory of "trace theory of memory," which posits that the more frequently and intensely a memory association is traced, the easier it becomes to recall the learned content. The TPR method associates physical movements with learning content, and the entire teaching process involves multiple repetitions. Consequently, in terms of the quality and efficiency of knowledge retrieval, the TPR method exhibits significant advantages. The extensive listening and repetitive actions in TPR deeply imprint the learned knowledge.

Humanistic psychology serves as another psychological basis for the TPR method. TPR and humanistic psychology share a common philosophy-focusing on the emotional aspects of learning itself. TPR emphasizes that it's of great significance to reduce students' anxiety in language teaching, which reflects a human-centered humanistic approach.

2.2.3. The Linguistic Foundation of Total Physical Response

The linguistic foundation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method is structuralism linguistics. The TPR method is highly correlated with structuralism in linguistics. In the teaching process of TPR, teachers primarily utilize imperative sentences in conjunction with actions to subconsciously enable students to internalize grammatical rules. Extensive listening enables students to gradually internalize these grammatical rules, which ultimately improve their ability in reading, writing, and speaking.

2.2.4. The Learning Theory Basis of Total Physical Response

The Total Physical Response (TPR) method shares common ground with behaviorism, which believes that learning involves establishing connections between stimuli and responses. The TPR method facilitates language teaching through the assistance of sounds and actions, emphasizing the importance of behavior in learning. In the TPR teaching approach, the initial instructions given by the teacher constitute an external stimulus, while the actions taken by the students serve as a response to the external stimulus. The multiple repetitions of actions involved in the TPR teaching process can be understood as reinforcement. Therefore, the TPR method reflects the core ideology of behaviorism.

2.3. Principles of Total Physical Response

The Total Physical Response (TPR) method adheres to several distinctive principles.

Firstly, the TPR method advocates that listening comprehension should be prioritized in language teaching. In language education, the cultivation of students' listening skills should come first; Secondly, the TPR method promotes the enhancement of students' comprehension of linguistic knowledge through physical movements and exercises; Thirdly, the TPR method opposes forcing students to speak; Lastly, the TPR method emphasizes the reduction of anxiety in students during the teaching process.

2.4. Main Steps of Total Physical Response

The implementation steps of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method can be broadly divided into four stages.

The first stage is the teacher's demonstration phase. In this stage, the teacher gives instructions in the target language while performing actions. Learners observe the teacher's actions and listen carefully to the instructions. The teacher can repeat the instructions and actions multiple times to ensure students understand the correspondence between the instructions and actions; The second stage is the student imitation phase. During this phase, the teacher gives instructions in the target language and performs the actions, while students only perform the actions; The third stage is the collaborative practice phase. In this stage, the teacher gives the instructions, performs the actions, and students repeat the instructions while performing the corresponding actions; The fourth stage is the student's independent practice phase. In this stage, the teacher only gives the instructions without performing any actions, and students repeat the instructions given by the teacher and perform the corresponding actions.

3. Current Research Status of Total Physical Response

James Asher, an American psychologist, is considered the pioneer in the research of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method. Through various studies, he found that TPR significantly improved listening skills for children and adults learning Japanese and Russian under different conditions (2). In another article, Asher (3) reported the results of multiple experiments, further validated and explained the effectiveness of TPR, and compared it with the translation approach and audio-lingual approach. In the 1960s, Asher's articles primarily explored the role of TPR in Japanese and Russian learning, elucidating its effectiveness in language learning. The 1970s marked the heyday of TPR. Since then, various researchers have elaborated and interpreted TPR, continuously enriching people's understanding of this methodology. For instance, Seely (11) provided a detailed description of the steps of TPR and exemplified its application in English teaching. This article of Seely's serves as a reference for researchers adopting TPR in their experiments. Since its inception, TPR has been prevalent in various language teaching contexts. Over the following decades, numerous articles have emerged exploring the application of TPR in actual language classrooms. These articles have collected data through experiments, providing compelling evidence for the practical effects of TPR. For instance, Wore demonstrated that integrating TPR training in Spanish classes can enhance students' learning outcomes and improve teachers' evaluations (14). Sano (12) discussed the integration of TPR in English classrooms. Elisabeth Elliott and Lisa Yountchi investigated the role of TPR in acquiring Russian Verbs of Motion (VoM) (7). In the 21st century, TPR has gained new vitality. During this period, there has been a surge in studies exploring the application of TPR in English teaching. Kothar Talib Sulaiman Al Harrasi examined the use of TPR in English classrooms in Oman and found that TPR promoted English language learning (10). After the 21st century, China has also conducted numerous studies on the application of TPR in English teaching. For example, Zhang researched the application of TPR in English vocabulary teaching

in primary schools (16), while Zhao Sa and Zhao Qiannan elaborated on the use of TPR in oral English teaching in primary schools (15). Concurrently, the "Chinese fever" has opened new doors for TPR research. There has been a proliferation of studies exploring the application of TPR in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. For instance, Shang and Yang studied the use of TPR in teaching Chinese in Indonesia (13). Their experiments showed that compared to traditional methods, TPR significantly promoted Indonesian students' Chinese language learning. Fan examined the application of TPR in comprehensive Chinese classes for elementary students in Thailand, based on her teaching practice (8). Through analyzing teaching cases in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, she studied the suitability of TPR for comprehensive Chinese classes at the elementary level in Thailand.

4. Evaluations of Total Physical Response

4.1. Evaluations of Total Physical Response by Different Researchers

Many researchers hold a positive attitude towards TPR, believing that it can capture students' attention, stimulate their interest, make learners feel relaxed, and achieve better language teaching outcomes. However, at the same time, some scholars have also criticized TPR, arguing that it is only suitable for teaching beginners and works best for simpler concepts, but its effect on teaching abstract concepts is limited. Regarding the evaluation of TPR, most researchers maintain an objective stance. Based on their objective views of TPR or experimental findings, they often propose suggestions for the future application of TPR, which is crucial for its improvement and development.

A dialectical evaluation of TPR serves as a catalyst for better applying it in practical foreign language teaching. For instance, Celestino stated in his article that TPR classroom teaching should involve a series of instructions that engage students in the classroom rather than being controlled by the teacher (5). Zhang elaborated on some implementation difficulties of TPR and provided corresponding coping strategies (17). Through the objective evaluations of different researchers, the application of TPR in foreign language teaching can be better promoted.

4.2. Understanding Total Physical Response from the Author's Perspective

4.2.1. Advantages of Total Physical Response

Firstly, the implementation of TPR in foreign language teaching creates a more authentic and engaging learning environment. The teaching process of TPR resembles how children learn their native language, and teachers design specific instructions tailored to the material before conducting TPR-based instruction. Consequently, learners interact with teachers and peers through these instructions, fostering a sense of authenticity in the foreign language learning environment. Moreover, the high level of participation and interaction in TPR classrooms renders the learning experience enjoyable for students.

Secondly, TPR serves as a method to enhance students' retention of knowledge. By associating physical movements with knowledge, TPR facilitates the digestion of information in the brain.

Thirdly, TPR teaching methodology promotes interactive engagement between teachers and students, which fosters a positive teacher-student relationship. In TPR-guided classrooms, there is a greater degree of teacher-student interaction, which differs from the traditional one-way communication. This increased and harmonious interaction, coupled with a higher student participation, enhances students' sense of involvement and engagement, ultimately increasing their trust in teachers and fostering a positive teacher-student relationship.

Fourthly, TPR facilitates the transfer of knowledge. Asher argues that the listening skill has a positive transfer effect on other foreign language skills, particularly the skill of speaking(3). The TPR method enhances the development of language skills and serves as a training method,

which promotes the establishment of corresponding schemas in learners' minds and facilitates the transfer of skills.

Fifthly, TPR improves learners' cognitive flexibility and enhances their thinking abilities. By coordinating the left and right hemispheres of the brain, TPR enhances their cooperation and regulation during cognitive processes, which ultimately improves learners' responsiveness and fosters the development of their thinking abilities.

Lastly, TPR teaching methodology enhances students' concentration. TPR requires foreign language teaching to be conducted in a low-anxiety environment with high-frequency teacher-student interaction. Under such circumstances, learners actively participate in class activities, so their ability of concentration will be improved.

4.2.2. Limitations of Total Physical Response

Despite its scientific basis and rationality, which have been demonstrated through numerous empirical studies, TPR, as a publicly proposed teaching method, still possesses numerous limitations.

Firstly, in a TPR teaching environment, teachers may not be able to pay attention to every student individually. When employing TPR for foreign language teaching, teachers cannot confirm whether all students have understood the taught knowledge. Some learners, regardless of whether they understand or not, may mimic the actions of their peers, making it difficult for teachers to ascertain whether students have grasped the knowledge.

Secondly, TPR is not suitable for classes with large size. Implementing TPR in a class with a large number of students poses significant challenges. On one hand, the implementation of TPR tends to be time-consuming, and ensuring that every student understands the language knowledge taught in the class may reduce the teaching efficiency. On the other hand, the constraints of space will limit the effectiveness of TPR, because TPR is a language teaching method that relies heavily on physical actions and the implementation of TPR requires sufficient space.

Thirdly, TPR requires a relatively high financial investment. In many underdeveloped countries, there are still significant issues with the allocation of educational resources. These countries may not even have the access to foreign language education. The implementation of TPR requires governments to invest more funds in education, both to provide more suitable spaces for implementation and to hire teachers with higher teaching standards.

Fourthly, TPR demands a high level of proficiency from language teachers. TPR places stringent demands on language teachers' linguistic knowledge and preparation skills. To effectively implement TPR, language teachers must be very familiar with the subject matter and be able to prepare well-designed lessons based on students' proficiency levels. This requires language teachers to possess excellent abilities of preparing a lesson. Furthermore, language classrooms utilizing TPR often require teachers to have strong classroom management skills, as the class may not proceed according to the teacher's intended direction without proper management.

Fifthly, TPR is primarily suitable for beginners in language learning. TPR tends to be effective in teaching relatively simple language points. However, when dealing with more abstract language concepts or complex grammatical structures, TPR may not be practical. Therefore, for intermediate and advanced language learners with higher language proficiency requirements, TPR may not be a satisfactory method.

Lastly, TPR overly emphasizes the importance of the skill of listening and neglects the cultivation of overall language abilities. TPR places primary focus on the training of listening skill, assuming that improving listening abilities will naturally lead to the development of speaking and other skills. However, in real-life language learning, reading, writing, speaking, and listening often progress simultaneously.

5. Discussions on the Special Roles of Teachers and Students in Total Physical Response Classrooms

5.1. The Special Roles of Teachers in Total Physical Response Classrooms

In a classroom that employs Total Physical Response (TPR) as a teaching method, the language teacher plays crucial roles.

Firstly, the teacher serves as an organizer who plans and designs more activities. TPR requires teachers to set up a greater number of activities, and compared to traditional lesson, teachers in TPR classrooms need to carefully design even more activities and instructions for teaching; Secondly, the teacher is a more active participant in the classroom. In TPR classrooms, the interaction between the language teacher and students is stronger. The teacher needs to demonstrate and lead the students in executing the commands and actions. Not only do the students participate in the classroom, but the teacher is also involved throughout, practically; Lastly, the teacher is a more compassionate educator. In TPR classrooms, teachers need to create a positive classroom atmosphere, reduce students' anxiety, and consider their psychological state. They do not force students to speak. From this perspective, teachers who adopt TPR teaching methods exhibit more humanistic care.

5.2. The Special Roles of Students in Total Physical Response Classrooms

First and foremost, students are more active practitioners of knowledge in TPR classrooms. In TPR classrooms, students need to integrate knowledge with physical actions and accept knowledge through action, which is essentially a practical process. They are no longer just passive recipients of knowledge, but active practitioners of knowledge in the process of interacting with teachers.

Secondly, students are observers and imitators of the teacher's behavior. TPR requires students to observe and imitate the teacher's actions, and then express the understood knowledge through physical imitation. However, in classrooms that adopt other teaching methods, the demands on students' imitation and observation skills are less significant. Due to its unique characteristics, TPR requires students to play a more proactive role as observers and imitators. TPR classrooms endow teachers and students with unique role characteristics, which in turn creates a more democratic and equal teacher-student relationship. The uniqueness of the roles and relationships between teachers and students in TPR is also one of the many shining points of TPR.

6. Practical Challenges and Future Development Trends of Total Physical Response

6.1. The Practical Challenges of Total Physical Response

The actual implementation of TPR in foreign language teaching practice poses challenges for teachers, students, and schools.

6.1.1. The Challenges Faced by Teachers

Adopting TPR as a teaching method requires teachers to invest more time in learning, not only in acquiring knowledge but also in mastering how to design a lesson by using TPR. This poses not only a temporal challenge but also a challenge in terms of energy and emotional investment for teachers. Additionally, teachers will face significant pressure in classroom management. When using TPR with children, even more attention needs to be paid to classroom management, as children tend to be more active and difficult to control. The high level of interaction in TPR classrooms often provides children with opportunities to lose focus or become distracted.

6.1.2. The Challenges Faced by Students

Firstly, TPR poses demands on students' comprehension abilities. As TPR often utilizes the target language to issue instructions combined with actions, students are required to possess a certain level of comprehension. Otherwise, if they cannot keep up with the teacher's pace, their self-esteem may be compromised. Secondly, TPR demands students' focused attention. When teachers employ TPR, they expect students to attentively listen to the instructions. Additionally, TPR places high demands on students' self-management abilities. As TPR is conducted in a relaxed environment and it lacks the formality of traditional teaching methods, it might lead to excessive laxity and necessitate stronger self-management skills from students.

6.1.3. The Challenges Faced by Schools

For schools, implementing TPR teaching faces the following challenges. Firstly, recruiting language teachers who are proficient at TPR is difficult. This difficulty is mainly manifested in two aspects. On one hand, many teachers are not familiar with TPR. On the other hand, while some language teachers are able to employ TPR in their teaching, they fail to innovate in their instruction. The rote use of TPR will inevitably strip it of its charm; Secondly, implementing TPR teaching increases the difficulty of school evaluation and teaching management. Classroom discipline control in TPR classes is challenging. And if a school adopts this method throughout, it will pose a significant challenge to the school's teaching management. Evaluating the teaching effectiveness of TPR classes is also difficult. Even language teachers themselves will find it challenging to determine whether students truly understand the language knowledge in TPR classes; Thirdly, TPR imposes higher demands on the school's curriculum design. Many schools have an overall curriculum design and regulations for teaching progress. Under the TPR teaching method, it is difficult to grasp the teaching progress of each class, thus posing a greater challenge to the school's curriculum design.

6.2. Future Development Trends of Total Physical Response

6.2.1. Integrating Total Physical Response into Foreign Language Teaching and Complementing It with Other Teaching Skills to Jointly Promote Foreign Language Instruction

If TPR is utilized throughout the entire teaching process, the efficiency of language teaching and learning can actually be quite low. While TPR can create better learning scenarios, repeatedly repeating instructions for students to understand the meaning of the target knowledge can be time-consuming. Therefore, selectively and correctively using TPR in the classroom can better promote language teaching, and combining TPR with other teaching methods can maximize its effectiveness.

6.2.2. More Widespread Application of Total Physical Response in Foreign Language Teaching for Individuals with Hearing, Visual, or Brain Impairments

Up to now, there has been limited research on the application of TPR in foreign language learning among individuals with hearing, visual, or brain impairments, but this could potentially be a new direction for future foreign language teaching. Some scholars have provided insights into the feasibility of using TPR for teaching these populations. Conroy pointed out that the use of a modified version of TPR for visually impaired students is valuable for their learning (6). Fu (2022) discussed the significance, implications, and suggestions for using TPR in teaching hearing-impaired students (9).

When one sensory organ is impaired, other sensory organs tend to develop better (9). For hearing-impaired students, who cannot hear sounds but can see actions, TPR, as a teaching method that utilizes actions to aid language learning, can play a significant role in their education. For learners with hearing impairment, visually-based teaching has the most profound impact on them, and the use of actions in language teaching advocated by TPR can

open another door to the world for these children; For visually impaired students, who cannot see but can hear, teachers can guide them to feel and learn the language. Students who are struggling with brain impairments and whose intellectual abilities are below average, may have difficulty in understanding language. They tend to comprehend actions better.

For some language learners with impaired physical functions, TPR teaching enables them to experience language knowledge in a more authentic way. Especially for learners with hearing, visual, and brain function impairments, learning through movement becomes their most crucial way of perceiving the world. However, at the same time, the difficulty of applying TPR among individuals with physical impairments is greater, mainly reflected in the higher requirements for teachers. TPR is often used in foreign language teaching, but for learners with hearing, visual, and brain function impairments, TPR can be an extremely important method of native language teaching.

Currently, there is still limited research on the application of TPR in individuals with hearing, visual, or brain impairments, but in practical teaching for these students, the concept of TPR is often implicitly utilized. In the future, how to better and more widely apply TPR in teaching students with functional impairments is a promising research direction.

6.2.3. Integrating Total Physical Response with Scientific Technology to Jointly Empower Foreign Language Classrooms

Currently, the teaching of TPR often focuses on exploring how teachers can better understand and apply TPR to promote foreign language teaching. However, relying solely on teachers to implement TPR in the classroom can be challenging, and TPR often has limitations in explaining abstract nouns and complex grammatical structures. Therefore, modern technology can be utilized in combination with TPR to jointly assist foreign language teaching and form a synergistic effect with language teachers. For example, TPR is relatively effective in teaching verbs or simple vocabulary. Teachers can record vocabulary instruction using TPR methods and then guide students to learn through video playback in the actual classroom. For subsequent complex explanations, teachers can adopt other teaching methods, which can both satisfy the needs of intermediate to advanced learners and improve teaching efficiency. In today's era of rapid technological development, how to leverage technology and TPR to jointly empower foreign language teaching represents a new development direction for TPR in the future.

6.2.4. More Widespread Application and Research on TPR in Adult Language Teaching and Learning

Currently, research on TPR is primarily focused on foreign language teaching for young children and infants, with significantly less research conducted in the adult population compared to the child domain. In fact, the original intention of TPR was not solely to promote foreign language teaching for children. Many of Asher's own studies on TPR actually targeted adults. In a 1967 article, Asher and Price conducted experiments using TPR and concluded that under similar conditions, adults may even achieve better results in foreign language learning (4). Furthermore, according to Asher and Price, 8-year-old children performed worse in understanding Russian compared to 10-year-olds or 14-year-olds (4). This indicates that TPR may be even more effective in promoting foreign language learning for adults than for children. However, the current research on TPR is more concentrated in the child domain. It is likely due to the fact that children tend to prefer physical activities and anticipate more interaction in the classroom, resulting in better research feedback for TPR teaching. Therefore, researchers tend to implement the TPR teaching method among children to obtain more feedback on its effectiveness. Nonetheless, future research on TPR is expected to become more prevalent in the field of adult foreign language teaching.

7. Conclusion

Initially, the purpose of TPR was to promote foreign language teaching. As a scientifically proven method that can enhance learners' foreign language acquisition, TPR possesses unique advantages and principles. However, there are still some challenges in truly implementing it in foreign language teaching. Overall, TPR is a highly valuable method in the field of foreign language teaching and has the potential to expand into more areas in the future.

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