THE METHOD OF TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE IN TEACHING YOUNG CHILDREN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

MAGDALENA DUMITRANA
University of Pitesti, Faculty of Education
mdumitrana@yahoo.com

*Abstract***:** The basic idea behind Total Physical Response is that a language learner learns to physically respond to things heard in foreign language. That is that the learner learns to comprehend things said in the language by a teacher. Often at first, these words are simple commands. By using gestures and props, the teacher is able to create a non-linguistic context to his speech to convey meaning to the learner. The paper directs the attention to using TPR in young children's foreign language learning.

Key-words: didactics, second language, body awareness, physical reaction, motor learning

1. The context

Both researches as well as the empirical observations have shown that the childhood age is the most receptive period for foreign language learning. A multitude of the methods were developed in the world concerning the second language acquisition by the children. However, our literature and practice in the field is rather poor. The courses, in school and out of school do not utilize coherently any approached sustained by a coherent research/theory. The teaching is limited mostly to the use of pictures and simple exercises. So called communicational method is limited to some text books inspired from somewhere else. The teaching methods are actually, the traditional ones.
It is hard to say what is the main cause of the maintaining this low standard but surely there are several motives linked both to the educational policies and the quality and content of the foreign language teachers' training.
Obviously, there is an urgent need of making these things right.
Among the different theories, it seems that the one of Total Physical Response is very appropriate for young children's learning. Based on activity, this theory follows actually, the child natural development. In fact, the creator of this method affirms that there is about an experience rather a concept. The theoretical and practical construction is based on the observation of the way children acquire the first language.
The two important directions in this respect are:
- the use of one's own body and the physical interaction with the objects;
- the start with a "silent period", stimulating firstly the development of the receptive aspect (understanding language) and then the expressive one.

2. Some main ideas of the Total Physical Response approach

TPR starts from very well known facts, as:
- The learner needs to receive a great quantity of language input. The important thing is that this input to be comprehensible. In other words, the language environment is essential but equally essential is that the person understands this the meaning conveyed.
This language input needs also to be direct (here and now) and not mediated (by technology, for example:a broadcast, a film, etc).

- The beginners need not to be "forced" to speak immediately in the second language, but after a period of verbal input that will train the ear and understanding. The process is similar to the way an infant

BDD-A20431 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:41:00 UTC)

learns to talk; first, he understands what it is said to him and then he starts actually speaking. The period of "silence" is essential in TPR.
- A compulsory condition is that the language input to be directly related to the possibility of the learner's physical reaction to the content. That is why some of the first utterances in the second language are concrete commands (stand up, sit down, run, touch your nose, etc). Then it follows gradually, the extensions of the verbal structures and grammar patterns.
-A continuous attention is given to the non-linguistic context, created by the teacher using gestures and props, in order to clarify the meanings.

3. Aspects of TPR

Starting from the basic principles of the TPR, several directions were developed by the author or by other followers. There are, therefore:
- the approach highlighting everything that can be done with general body movement: (stand up, sit down, turn around, turn right, turn left, lift up your arm, touch your
nose, jump, walk, etc.)This kind of exercise needs a space in the room, so the children would be able to move around.
- the approach focusing on the objects; depending the topic, the teacher could bring different objects in the classroom (vegetables, fruits, different categories of toys, etc). The exercises with object can be developed in a common room, requesting actually, sitting at the table and handling the objects as a response to a verbal input.
- the approached concentrated on pictures - pictures of objects, of people doing different things; the children are asked about the names, characteristics, activities related to the objects and/or persons represented in these pictures. Children's pictures or story books children, newspaper and magazine pictures can be also very useful.
- TPR Storytelling is a method for teaching foreign languages invented by Blaine Ray, a Spanish teacher from, California, in 1990.He began to use James Asher's Total Physical Response to teach Spanish.In this way, he found that changing from commands to the third person singular allowed him to tell stories and also, asking the students to act out the parts of the characters in the stories, a highly effective TPR physical element are preserved. His method combines Dr. James Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) with Dr. Stephen Krashen's language acquisition strategies. Here there are few basic ideas of this approach:
- *Before teaching a story or even saying a sentence in the target language we need to establish meaning.* We do that by translation or gesture.
- *Now students are ready for storytelling***.** Here we use the three phrases that are on the board to ask a story. We start out with a problem. A boy/girl needs or wants something. We start asking questions using the phrases. If the phrase is wants to have, we will start asking questions using wants to have. Does the boy want to have an elephant? (Students respond yes or no. The teacher says that is right, the boy wants to have an elephant.) Now the detail has been established. Does the boy want to have an elephant or a gorilla? Does the boy want to have a gorilla? Does the boy want to have an elephant? Who wants to have an elephant? What does the boy want to have? Does the boy want to have an elephant? With this last question we have completed the circle. That is we are back to where we started. This powerful circling technique is used in TPRS to get lots of repetitions. It makes the class interesting because the teacher can answer each question differently. The story develops as the teacher continues to ask more questions. Each new detail adds new interest to the developing story.
- *A story has 3 locations. Start at the first location and establish a problem***.** From add another character and other details. If the boy wants a tiger, you can ask for details about the tiger. Where is the tiger from? Is he big or little? What does the tiger do? Does the boy want a tiger from Kenya or Chile ? Does the boy want a small plastic tiger or a big yellow tiger? You could also have a girl who wants a small

BDD-A20431 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:41:00 UTC)

plastic gorilla from Tokyo . In your questions to the class you would compare the boy to the girl. Who wants a gorilla? What does the girl want? What does the boy want? Who wants a tiger? All of these questions establish details about the story. After you have established many details of the story you will then go to location two. There you will attempt to solve the problem but fail. Finally the story will move to the third location where the story is solved.
- *Next you will have your students translate and discuss the extended reading of the story.* You will now continue going back and forth between storytelling and reading. (http://www.blaineraytprs.com/pages.php?page=explanationpage)

4. Using TPR with young children

To be informed about method and agree with it does not mean that it is necessary or it is possible to apply it entirely. A method is just a method and not a panacea. One must take into account the educational context within which the given method is going to be developed. First of all, one must consider the children/students that are going to be taught.
Or, considering young children, TPR seems to be most appropriate. On the other side, there is not necessary to adopt all the aspects of the method, but only the ones suited at the given time and situation. Therefore, for the very beginners, the use of body ought to be the most appropriate approach. Children love to move and moving with a meaning is even more appealing. In a program of teaching English in a kindergarten, the English teachers has starting with few commands, asking them to run, walk, jump, laugh, sleep, snoring , and so on, about two words in a lesson. Soon, however, children were able to remember the meaning of more than two commands, asking themselves to learn more.
The second phase was to attach some objects to the actions. There were chosen several toys- animals and dolls. They were named while "acting".
However, the TPR "prescriptions" were not observed entirely. For example, the period of "silence" did not last more than two lessons. Spontaneously, the children started to shout the name of the actions, simultaneously accomplishing them. Therefore, they were encouraged to do so.
Another two activities were introduced, even if they were not followed the recommendations: singing (together with the physical moving) and drawing.
The results were unexpected: the motivation was always high, the discipline the same. Children were all around, with big noise, of course but very careful to catch the next command and to do everything properly. The drawing séances had two roles: to calm down the children and to repeat one of two (object) words that they just have learned.
The big problem was after the course was over and the children have started next year the English lessons with another teacher - a young and pretty teacher with no desire to play. Therefore, sitting silently in their chairs, the preschooler were obliged to repeat the name of some objects represented in the pictures. Soon, they loose any interest in English. They even tried to make a revolution, declaring that they cannot stand the new teacher and asking for the old one.
Here, there is another condition to succeed in using a method - the continuity.

5. Conclusion

The small experience using TPR techniques proves that the method can work very well with small children and need to be spread among people teaching preschool and primary school children. It demonstrates that there is no need to copy all the techniques but to design a learning program that is suitable to the environment conditions and the children's age and cultural experience.
Also, of an essential importance, is the teacher's personality. If she is not able to play, there is no way to use TPR but also, no way to teach young children. Flexibility and open eyes are two qualities that are compulsory for a teacher using active methods.

BDD-A20431 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:41:00 UTC)

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. ASHER, J.J., *The Total Physical Response (TPR): Review of the evidence* http://www.tpr-world.com/review_evidence.pdf
2. ASHER, J. J., Stephen M. SILVERS, S.M., *How to TPR Abstractions*: *The critical role of imagination* http://www.tpr-world.com/abstractions.html
3. KRASHEN, St.D., *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, book online http://www.sdkrashen.com/Principles_and_Practice/index.html
http://www.cortland.edu/www_root/flteach/FAQ/FAQ-TPR.html
http://www.tpr-world.com/
http://www.tprstorytelling.com/
http://www.tprstories.com/what-is-tprs.htm

BDD-A20431 © 2011 Valahia University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:41:00 UTC)