

TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND GENERAL PRINCIPLES²

Abstract

The focus of this paper is one of the methods of foreign language learning called Total Physical Response, which falls in line with neurolinguistic principles and naturalness of language acquisition. In the paper we identify the neurolinguistic background on which this method of foreign language instruction rests, namely we discuss how the acquisition of the mother tongue is mirrored in Total Physical Response – the teacher uses imperatives and body movements, which students then imitate, just like children observe their parents speaking and doing things. Furthermore, we discuss the role of left and right hemispheres of the brain in Total Physical Response and how this method develops and emphasizes the creative, physical side of language acquisition thus avoiding simultaneous reception and production. In addition, we also try to present some of the principles that teachers rely on in the teaching process and types of the TPR method in the classroom, depending on the materials used. Finally, we attempt to identify certain drawbacks of this method, which essentially present its limitations.

Key words: Total Physical Response, bio-programme, brain lateralization, listening comprehension, TPR activities, foreign language learning, foreign language teaching.

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 lan-

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guage 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 were heavily 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. We shall try to identify the neurolinguistic background on which this method of foreign language instruction rests and we shall also try to present some of the principles that teachers rely on in the teaching process. Finally, we shall attempt to identify certain drawbacks of this method, which essentially present its limitations.

Theoretical frameworks

Total Physical Response (TPR) is one of the language teaching methods which was developed by James Asher, a professor of psychology at San Jose State University, California. Asher based the development of his approach to foreign language teaching on the way children acquire their mother tongue, primarily through the commands they receive from their parents. The premise is that the human brain has a biological programme for acquiring any natural language, including the sign language of the deaf, and that this process is visible when we observe how infants internalize their first language. Although the infant is not yet speaking, the child is imprinting a linguistic map of how the language works. Silently, the child internalizes the patterns and sounds of the mother tongue.

In this process children are silent, but act in response to hundreds of directives uttered in their first language such as “Come here”, “Put on your coat”, “Throw me the ball”, “Walk faster” etc. When the child has decoded and internalized enough of the mother tongue, speaking appears spontaneously (if there are no developmental impediments). The child’s speech will not be perfect, but gradually their utterances will approximate more and more that of an adult native speaker. Asher (2001) speculates that during this period of listening, the child internalizes a blueprint of phonology, grammar and semantics before they utter anything intelligible such as Mum or Dad.

Total Physical Response focuses in particular on two characteristics of first language acquisition (Nunan, 2010: 58): (1) “The child gets a vast amount of comprehensible input before beginning to speak. Young children comprehend language which is far in excess of their ability to produce.” (2) “There is a lot of physical manipulation and action language accompanying early input. ‘Throw the ball to Rudi’, ‘Put your arm through here’, etc. This action language, encouraging physical manipulation, is coached in the imperative.”

In other words, there exists a specific innate bio-programme for language learning (cf. Language Acquisition Device, Chomsky, 1969), which defines an optimal path for first and second language development, so Asher sees first and second language learning as parallel processes and claims that second language teaching and learning should reflect the naturalistic processes of first language acquisition. Three processes are seen as central here (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 90):

(a) Children develop listening competence before they develop the ability to speak. At the early stages of first language acquisition they can understand complex utterances that they cannot spontaneously produce or imitate. During this period of listening, the child may be making a mental “blueprint” of the language that will make it possible to produce spoken language later.

(b) Children’s ability in listening comprehension is acquired because children are required to respond physically to spoken language in the form of parental commands.

(c) Once a foundation in listening comprehension has been established, speech evolves naturally and effortlessly out of it.

In a similar vein, in the process of foreign language learning Asher intended to put great emphasis on comprehension first and production somewhat later. In his own words, “the skill we recommend is listening fluency, because it seems to have positive transfer to the other three skills, especially speaking” (Asher, 1969b: 261). In other words, the theory that was the foundation of this method emphasizes the great importance of the listening skill, which means that students need to understand a lot before they are actually able to speak, read or write. This essentially mimics the initial period of first language acquisition, where children listen for an extended period of time and then around the age of two (on average) start speaking independently.

Asher’s emphasis on developing comprehension skills before the learner is taught to speak leans onto a movement in foreign language teaching sometimes referred to as the Comprehension Approach and relies on several comprehension-based language teaching proposals (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 87-88):

- a) comprehension abilities precede productive skills in learning a language;
- b) the learning of speech should be delayed until comprehension skills are established;
- c) skills acquired through listening transfer to other skills;
- e) teaching should emphasize meaning rather than form;
- d) teaching should emphasize learner stress-free environment.

We shall later demonstrate how TPR dovetails with all of these principles and what their benefits are for both learners and teachers.

Besides the fact that TPR draws on the principles of first language acquisition, it also relies on the “trace theory” of memory in psychology, which holds that the more often or the more intensively a memory connection is traced, the stronger the memory association will be and the more likely it will be recalled (Richards and Rodgers,

1986: 87). Retracing can be done verbally (e.g. by repetition) and/or in association with motor activity. Combined tracing activities, such as verbal rehearsal accompanied by motor activity, hence increase the probability of successful recall. Stipulating that “motor learning, in contrast with verbal learning, appears to have enormous resistance to extinction” (Asher, 1969b: 253), Asher puts the major focus of his teaching method on the movement, which is essentially the response to the teacher’s stimulus. Hence the name of the method – total, for the movement of the entire body; physical – for the motor activity as the basis for learning; response – for the student’s reaction to the vocal stimulus he/she receives from the teacher. Through a number of experiments Asher (1966, 1969a, 1969b) proved the greater retention rate of vocabulary comprehension which was exhibited by students who developed their listening and comprehension skills with the use of TPR. Namely, even after an extended period of time the students instructed with TPR understood significantly more vocabulary items than their peers who were taught in the more traditional Grammar-Translation Method.

The second influential learning hypothesis that shaped TPR concerns brain lateralization, which defines different learning functions in the left- and right-brain hemispheres. Since “talking and comprehension are located in different parts of brain” (Koh Savović, 2012: 204), it is very painstaking for the learner to constantly jump back and forth between two hemispheres and activate them both at the same time, so the result is usually poor and short-term acquisition of items. As the right hemisphere encourages playfulness without fear, Total Physical Response seems to be directed to right-brain learning, just like the child acquires the mother tongue through motor movement, which is another right hemisphere activity. As opposed to that, the left hemisphere of the brain emphasizes “correctness” such as using the appropriate form of the verb and speaking with a near native pronunciation, which implies that the left brain does not want the student to take risks because he/she may make a mistake. In order to achieve success, right-hemisphere activities must occur before the left hemisphere can process language for production. When a sufficient amount of right-hemisphere learning has taken place, the left hemisphere will be triggered to produce language and to initiate other, more abstract language processes (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 91).

Finally, the third learning theory that supports TPR has to do with stress and anxiety, which are almost unavoidable in the foreign language classroom. Richards and Rodgers (1986: 88) explain that within the school of humanistic psychology, Asher shares a concern for the role of affective (emotional) factors in language learning and has therefore designed TPR as a method that is undemanding in terms of linguistic production because it involves game-like movements, reduces learner stress, and creates a positive mood in the learner, which facilitates learning. When compared to first language acquisition, which takes place in a stress-free environment through a very natural flow of communication, adult language learning environment often causes considerable stress and anxiety. In order to achieve this important condition for successful language learning, i.e. in order to remove stress and anxiety from the equation, the key

is to tap into the natural bio-programme for language development and thus recapture the relaxed and pleasurable experiences that accompany first language acquisition. By focusing on meaning interpreted through movement, rather than on language forms studied in the abstract, the learner is said to be liberated from self-conscious and stressful situations and is able to devote full energy to learning (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 91). Larsen-Freeman (2000: 113) highlights that “TPR was developed in order to reduce the stress people feel when studying foreign languages and thereby encourage students to persist in their study beyond a beginning level of proficiency”.

Having demonstrated how three different theoretical backgrounds intertwine and create a solid neurolinguistic foundation that relies on the naturalness of language acquisition, we now move to the illustration of general principles which guide the work of teachers in the foreign language classroom if they choose to employ TPR as the method of instruction.

General principles

As can be seen in the previous section, TPR is “brain compatible”, which means that there is short and long-term retention that is striking. To illustrate, retention with TPR is analogous to riding a bicycle: even if years have elapsed since acquiring the skill, after a few warm up trials, proficiency returns because memory is not just based on the cognitive aspect, but also on the motor one.

Furthermore, TPR is also aptitude-free, meaning academic aptitude is a negligible factor when TPR is applied by a skilled and talented teacher (Asher, 2001). In other words, this is effective for everyone regardless of students’ abilities, so TPR creates an impression amongst all students that they all are ‘A’ class students. In a traditional language programme, principals screen “low” academic students from foreign language classes under the assumption that they simply cannot do it. However, everyone is surprised when children who experience difficulty in a traditional foreign language classroom enjoy success in a TPR class. It is often seen that these students experience the exhilaration of being competitive with the all ‘A’ students (Asher, 2001).

Asher does not directly discuss the nature of language or how languages are organized. However, the labelling and ordering of TPR classroom drills seem to be built on assumptions that owe much to structuralist or grammar-based views of language. Asher (1977: 4) states that “most of the grammatical structure of the target language and hundreds of vocabulary items can be learned from the skillful use of the imperative by the instructor”. He views the verb, and particularly the verb in the imperative, as the central linguistic motif around which language use and learning are organized (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 88). Vocabulary and grammatical structures are emphasized over other language areas, which are embedded within imperatives that take the form of single words and multi-word chunks. One reason for the use of imperatives is

their frequency of occurrence in the speech directed at young children learning their native language (Larsen-Freeman, 1986: 115).

Asher also sees language as being composed of abstractions and non-abstractions, with non-abstractions being most specifically represented by concrete nouns and imperative verbs. He believes that learners can acquire a “detailed cognitive map” as well as “the grammatical structure of a language” without recourse to abstractions (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 88), which should be delayed until students have internalized a detailed cognitive map of the target language because they are not necessary for people to decode the grammatical structure of a language. Once students have internalized the code, abstractions can be introduced and explained in the target language (Asher, 1977: 11-12). The reasoning that lies behind this is that the same is true when children acquire their first language. They become fluent native speakers at a concrete level of discourse and only later do they gradually acquire abstractions in context or by asking direct questions (Asher, 2007).

Just as the young child can understand far more than he/she can verbalize, the beginner at language learning should be encouraged to develop listening skills before he/she is required to speak. Like with a person’s first language, there is a prolonged “silent” period when an acquirer’s receptive language far exceeds his expressive language (Ray and Seely, 2000: 8). Essentially, the TPR method does not force production but rather encourages the learner to speak when he/she is ready.

TPR is a method of using movements and gestures which are linked with spoken language in the form of commands (Englishtina, 2019: 115) and serves to create an atmosphere in which learners quickly and easily acquire new vocabulary and structures in a target language. Besides that, TPR also helps learners understand and memorize linguistic input because they use body movement as the media in the process of learning (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 92). Based on the nature of first language acquisition, Asher derived three key teaching principles for second language acquisition (Nunan, 2010: 58):

a) We should stress comprehension rather than production at the beginning levels of second language instruction with no demands on learners to generate the target structure themselves.

b) We should obey the ‘here and now’ principle.

c) We should provide input to learners by getting them to carry out commands. These commands should be coached in the imperative.

It is advised that teachers vary the sequence of the commands so that students do not simply memorize the action sequence without ever connecting the actions with the language. (Asher, 1969b: 254).

Richards and Rodgers (1986: 88-89) list an even more detailed set of principles on which TPR rests:

- second language learning is parallel to first language learning and should reflect the same naturalistic processes;

- listening should develop before speaking, so understanding of the language comes first, then speaking;
- children respond physically to spoken language, their response is nonverbal, at first;
- once listening comprehension has been developed, speech develops naturally and effortlessly out of it;
- delaying speech reduces stress, and learning must be fun and stress-free;
- the spoken language is emphasized over written language;
- the vocabulary and grammatical structures are emphasized over other language areas;
- students are expected to make errors when they first begin speaking. Teachers should be tolerant of them. Work on the fine details of the language should be postponed until students have become somewhat proficient;
- students should not be made to memorize fixed routines. Students must develop flexibility in understanding novel combinations of target language chunks.

TPR seems to work effectively for children and adults (Savić, 2014: 448). 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.

There are many kinds of activities which can be used by teachers in the process of TPR learning (for many examples of such exercises see Reilly and Ward, 1997). The first one, and the most frequently used one, is exercise by using command (imperative drill). This exercise is essential to demonstrate body movement and activity to students. It is hoped that when students are demonstrating the responses by acting out, they will absorb and comprehend the meaningful sentences or utterances. Typically it is structured in the following way: the teacher says a command in the foreign language and executes it, with students closely following him/her in the execution of the command. They are silent the whole time, they just employ body movements that accompany words in the foreign language (Chen and Wang, 2014: 52).

Later, when students have acquired enough vocabulary and grammatical structures, they shift from the silent period to a variety of conversational exercises. One of them is a dialogue, where students can interact and have a conversation during the lesson. In this process students can memorize and comprehend sentences in a real context, for example when a student is asked to cry, walk, open the door or the window, etc., he/she will do it for real (or in some cases pretend to do it).

In addition, another activity is role playing and it invites every student to act out his/her daily routine such as in school, restaurant, supermarket, and so on (see Savić, 2014: 452 for more details). It is very interesting and useful for students to practice the language because they really like to act and sometimes can even pretend to be other people.

Presentation by using OHP or the projector is also very interesting, especially because it develops students' motivation and interest in the learning process. In this type of activity students are asked to read or pronounce the words written on the screen. After that the teacher asks the students to act the words out in front of the class or the teacher asks the students to answer or react directly after the commands are written on the screen. There is a lot of immediate feedback for students because they instantly find out if they answered it well or not.

Finally, when students have acquired enough of the foreign language, reading and writing activities develop not only vocabulary but also train students to make sentences based on the right order. This activity can develop the students' imagination because they try to illustrate and translate the others' action into sentences by writing on the board, or while reading a passage, the others describe it in acting in front of the class.

Since half a century passed since this method has been designed, many other foreign language theoreticians and practitioners have contributed to its development, so there are several different directions in which TPR has developed. Its basic idea is that a language learner hears something in the language and physically responds to it. However, TPR is not just limited to whole body commands such as walking, turning around, and pointing to your nose. In fact, according to Wilson (2000), there are four major types of activities that can be done using the TPR mindset: TPR-B, TPR-O, TPR-P, and TPR-S.

TPR-B stands for "TPR with body", which includes 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, etc. (cf. Savić, 2014: 451-452 for detailed descriptions and instructions). This is best done in a room with some space to move around. TPR-O stands for "TPR with objects" and when this method is employed, verbs that are associated with the objects should be taught as well. TPR-P stands for "TPR with pictures", which are extremely effective language learning tools. The actual physical response with pictures is fairly basic – pointing at something – but the opportunity for vocabulary acquisition is as broad as the types of pictures which are used. In addition to taking their own pictures, teachers can find some story books, or some newspaper and magazine pictures. Finally, TPR-S was developed by Ray and Seely (2000), experienced TPR instructors, and is used in classrooms throughout the United States. It involves the teacher (and eventually the students) acting out simple stories as a means of understanding the story and internalizing vocabulary. Students listen and watch as the instructor tells an illustrated story in the target language using familiar vocabulary. Then, using gestures, each student is invited to retell the story in their own words to another student. After that, each student writes the story using their own words. Rapidly, story by story, students are amazed to discover that they can express themselves in speech, reading and writing.

Conclusion

Widodo (2005: 239-240) systematically presents the advantages and disadvantages of TPR when applied in the foreign language classroom. On the one hand, TPR is a lot of fun, learners enjoy it and it can be a real stirrer in the class as it lifts the pace and the mood. It is very memorable because it assists students to recognize phrases or words. When correlating it to learning styles, we can say that it is good for kinesthetic learners who need to be active in the class (Akogdan, 2017: 36). In addition, it can be used both in large or small classes – no matter how many students there are, as long as the teacher is prepared to take the lead, the learners will follow. It works well with mixed-ability classes since the physical actions get across the meaning effectively so that all the learners are able to comprehend the target language. There is no need to have a lot of preparation or materials using the TPR, because as long as the teacher is competent in what he/she wants to practice (a rehearsal beforehand can help), it will not take a lot of time to get ready. It is very effective with teenagers and young learners because it keeps them occupied and employs their energy (cf. Akogdan, 2017: 57). TPR involves both left and right-brain learning, which guarantees long term memorization of items.

On the other hand, there are some disadvantages to the method. The first one is that TPR can become monotonous when employed exclusively, which means that the teacher has to mix different methods. Furthermore, there is also only a certain set of vocabulary and grammar concepts that can be taught this way, namely commands and concrete objects (thus excluding discourse and abstract vocabulary). In addition, students often remember words in the command forms, which can be problematic when students need to switch to indicative forms. In the TPR method, or otherwise, it is fairly difficult to give instructions without using imperatives, so the language input is basically restricted to this single form. This leads to another problem: students are also not generally given the opportunity to express their own thoughts and ideas in a creative way.

When referring to the affective factors, there could be problems with students who are not used to performing actions because they might find it embarrassing. This can be the case initially, but if the teacher is prepared to perform the actions, the students might feel happier about copying. Essentially, it might take some time for students to relax and decide to participate.

When it comes to the level of proficiency, it is only really suitable for beginner levels because of the target language tied to lower levels (cf. Nikolov, 2016: 78), it can also occasionally be used successfully with intermediate and advanced levels, but the language needs to be adapted accordingly (ways of walking (stumble, stagger, tiptoe) or cooking verbs (whisk, stir, grate)).

Critique also has to be directed at the bio-programme framework, which is based on how children learn their first languages. It is true that many parents use command forms with their children, but parents also use a variety of sentences with various tenses as well as indicative and subjunctive forms. Parents naturally use these forms

without thinking about the supposed difficulty of verb tenses. For that reason, over-reliance on the imperative narrows down the students' linguistic repertoire and deprives them of a very important segment of input.

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. 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, which is the topic of another paper.

Biljana Radić-Bojanić

TOTALNI FIZIČKI ODGOVOR: TEORIJSKI OKVIRI I OPŠTI PRINCIPI

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad se bavi jednim od metoda u nastavi stranih jezika koji se zove totalni fizički odgovor i čiji se principi i postulati uklapaju u neurolingvistička saznanja i prirodni tok usvajanja maternjeg jezika. U radu ćemo objasniti i ilustrovati neurolingvistički okvir na kome se ovaj metod zasniva, tačnije pokazujemo kako se usvajanje maternjeg jezika odražava u ustrojstvu i organizaciji totalnog fizičkog odgovora. Nastavnik koristi imperATIVE i pokrete tela da bi pokazao značenje određenih predmeta i radnji, a učenici ponavljaju pokrete i slušaju reči na stranom jeziku, što je proces sličan usvajanju maternjeg jezika, kad dete posmatra roditelje dok govore i rade nešto. U radu takođe objašnjavamo ulogu leve i desne hemisfere mozga u procesu usvajanja stranog jezika i pravimo razliku između totalnog fizičkog odgovora i drugih pristupa, koja se odražava u tome da totalni fizički odgovor više aktivira desnu hemisferu koja pokreće kreativne fizičke aktivnosti, te se na taj način izbegava istovremena recepcija i produkcija stranog jezika, što je slučaj kad se aktivira leva hemisfera. Osim toga, u radu izlažemo osnovne principe na kojima se ovaj metod zasniva i elaboriramo ih, te navodimo tipove metoda totalnog fizičkog odgovora, koji zavise od materijala koji se koriste (slike, priče, itd.). Na kraju sem prednosti ovog metoda predstavljamo i njegove nedostatke, koji se uglavnom odnose na opseg jezičkih struktura koje se kroz njega mogu naučiti, nemogućnost podučavanja apstrakcija i ograničenja u nivou znanja učenika.

Ključne reči: totalni fizički odgovor, bio-program, lateralizacija mozga, razumevanje slušanja, nastavne aktivnosti, učenje stranog jezika, nastava stranog jezika.

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