

Total Physical Response

Introduction

Let us first consider a general approach to foreign language instruction which has been named the **Comprehension Approach**. It is called this because of the importance it gives to listening comprehension. Most of the other methods we have looked at have students speaking the target language from the first day. In the 1960s, James Asher's research gave rise to the hypothesis that language learning starts first with understanding and ends with production. After the learner internalizes an extensive map of how the target language works, speaking will appear spontaneously. Of course, the students' speech will not be perfect, but gradually speech will become more target-like. Notice that this is exactly how an infant acquires its native language. A baby spends many months listening to the people around it long before it ever says a word. The child has the time to try to make sense out of the sounds it hears. No one tells the baby that it must speak. The child chooses to speak when it is ready to do so.

There are several methods being practiced today that have in common an attempt to apply these observations to language instruction. One such method is Krashen and Terrell's Natural Approach. The Natural Approach shares certain features with the Direct Method, which we examined in Chapter 3. Emphasis is placed on students' developing basic communication skills through receiving meaningful exposure to the target language (**comprehensible input**). Meaning is given priority over form and thus vocabulary acquisition is stressed. The students listen to the teacher using the target language communicatively from the first day of instruction. They do not speak at first. The teacher helps her students to understand her by using pictures and occasional words in the students' native language and by being as expressive as possible. It is thought that if the teacher uses language that is just in advance of students' current level of proficiency ($i+1$), while making sure that her input is comprehensible, acquisition will proceed 'naturally.' Unconscious

acquisition, then, is favored over more conscious learning. Creating a low **affective filter** is also a condition for acquisition that is met when the classroom atmosphere is one in which anxiety is reduced and students' self-confidence is boosted. The filter is kept low as well by the fact that students are not put on the spot to speak; they speak when they are ready to do so.

Another method that fits within the Comprehension Approach is Winitz and Reed's self-instructional program and Winitz' *The Learnables*. In this method, students listen to tape-recorded words, phrases, and sentences while they look at accompanying pictures. The meaning of the utterance is clear from the context the picture provides. The students are asked to respond in some way, such as pointing to each picture as it is described, to show that they understand the language to which they are listening; however, they do not speak. Stories illustrated by pictures are also used as a device to convey abstract meaning.

A third method that fits here is the Lexical Approach. Although its originator, Michael Lewis, claims that the Lexical Approach is an approach, not a method, it really belongs under the category of the Comprehension Approach, we feel. This is because the Lexical Approach is less concerned with student production and more concerned that students receive and comprehend abundant input. Particularly at lower levels, teachers talk extensively to their students in the target language, while requiring little or no verbal response from them. Students are also given exercises and activities that raise their awareness about multi-word lexical items, such as 'I see what you mean,' and 'Take your time.' Like Krashen and Terrell, Lewis emphasizes acquisition over learning, assuming that 'It is exposure to enough suitable input, not formal teaching, which is key to increasing the learner's lexicon (Lewis 1997: 197).

A fourth method, James Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR), is the one we will examine in detail here in order to see how the principles of the Comprehension Approach are put into practice. Based on his research cited above, Asher reasoned that the fastest, least stressful way to achieve understanding of any target language is to follow directions uttered by the instructor (without native language translation). We will learn about Total Physical Response through our usual way of observing a class in which it is being used. The class is located in Sweden. It is a beginning class for 30 Grade 5 students. They study English for one class period three times a week.

Experience¹

We follow the teacher as she enters the room, and we take a seat in the back of the room. It is the first class of the year, so after the teacher takes attendance,

¹ This lesson is based upon the one in Asher (1982).

she introduces the method they will use to study English. She explains in Swedish, 'You will be studying English in a way that is similar to the way you learned Swedish. You will not speak at first. Rather, you will just listen to me and do as I do. I will give you a command to do something in English, and you will do the actions along with me. I will need four volunteers to help me with the lesson.'

Hands go up, and the teacher calls on four students to come to the front of the room and sit with her on chairs that are lined up facing the other students. She tells the other students to listen and to watch.

In English the teacher says, 'Stand up.' As she says it, she stands up and she signals for the four volunteers to rise with her. They all stand up. 'Sit down,' she says, and they all sit. The teacher and the students stand up and sit down together several times according to the teacher's command; the students say nothing. The next time that they stand up together, the teacher issues a new command, 'Turn around.' The students follow the teacher's example and turn so that they are facing their chairs. 'Turn around,' the teacher says again and this time they turn to face the other students as before. 'Sit down. Stand up. Turn around. Sit down.' She says, 'Walk,' and they all begin walking towards the front row of the students' seats. 'Stop. Jump. Stop. Turn around. Walk. Stop. Jump. Stop. Turn around. Sit down.' The teacher gives the commands and they all perform the actions together. The teacher gives these commands again, changing their order and saying them quite quickly. 'Stand up. Jump. Sit down. Stand up. Turn around. Jump. Stop. Turn around. Walk. Stop. Turn around. Walk. Jump. Turn around. Sit down.'

Once again the teacher gives the commands; this time, however, she remains seated. The four volunteers respond to her commands. 'Stand up. Sit down. Walk. Stop. Jump. Turn around. Turn around. Walk. Turn around. Sit down.' The students respond perfectly. Next, the teacher signals that she would like one of the volunteers to follow her commands alone. One student raises his hand and performs the actions the teacher commands.

Finally, the teacher approaches the other students who have been sitting observing her and their four classmates. 'Stand up,' she says and the class responds. 'Sit down. Stand up. Jump. Stop. Sit down. Stand up. Turn around. Turn around. Jump. Sit down.' Even though they have not done the actions before, the students are able to perform according to the teacher's commands.

The teacher is satisfied that the class has mastered these six commands. She begins to introduce some new ones. 'Point to the door,' she orders. She extends her right arm and right index finger in the direction of the door at the side of the classroom. The volunteers point with her. 'Point to the desk.' She points to her own big teacher's desk at the front of the room. 'Point to the chair.' She points to the chair behind her desk and the students follow.

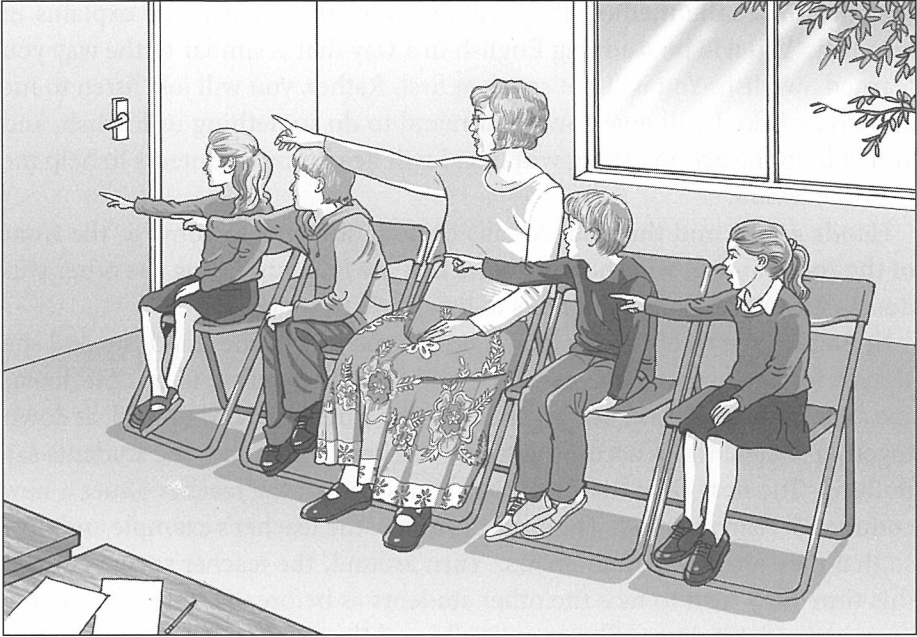


Figure 8.1 Students and teacher acting out the teacher's command

'Stand up.' The students stand up. 'Point to the door.' The students point. 'Walk to the door.' They walk together. 'Touch the door.' The students touch it with her. The teacher continues to command the students as follows: 'Point to the desk. Walk to the desk. Touch the desk. Point to the door. Walk to the door. Touch the door. Point to the chair. Walk to the chair. Touch the chair.' She continues to perform the actions with the students, but changes the order of the commands. After practicing these new commands with the students several times, the teacher remains seated, and the four volunteers carry out the commands by themselves. Only once do the students seem confused, at which point the teacher repeats the command which has caused difficulty and performs the action with them.

Next the teacher turns to the rest of the class and gives the following commands to the students sitting in the back row: 'Stand up. Sit down. Stand up. Point to the desk. Point to the door. Walk to the door. Walk to the chair. Touch the chair. Walk. Stop. Jump. Walk. Turn around. Sit down.' Although she varies the sequence of commands, the students do not seem to have any trouble following the order.

Next, the teacher turns to the four volunteers and says, 'Stand up. Jump to the desk.' The students have never heard this command before. They hesitate a second and then jump to the desk just as they have been told. Everyone laughs at this sight. 'Touch the desk. Sit on the desk.' Again, the teacher uses

a novel command, one they have not practiced before. The teacher then issues two commands in the form of a compound sentence, 'Point to the door, and walk to the door.' Again, the group performs as it has been commanded.

As the last step of the lesson, the teacher writes the new commands on the board. Each time she writes a command, she acts it out. The students copy the sentences into their notebooks.

The class is over. No one except the teacher has spoken a word. However, a few weeks later when we walk by the room we hear a different voice. We stop to listen for moment. One of the students is speaking. We hear her say, 'Raise your hands. Show me your hands. Close your eyes. Put your hands behind you. Open your eyes. Shake hand with your neighbor. Raise your left foot.' We look in and see that the student is directing the other students and the teacher with these commands. They are not saying anything; they are just following the student's orders.

Thinking about the Experience

Now that we have observed the Total Physical Response Method being used in a class, let us examine what we have seen. We will list our observations and then try to understand the principles upon which the teacher's behavior is based.

Observations	Principles
1 The teacher gives a command in the target language and performs the action with the students.	Meaning in the target language can often be conveyed through actions. Memory is activated through learner response. Beginning language instruction should address the right hemisphere of the brain, the part which controls nonverbal behavior. The target language should be presented in chunks, not just word by word.
2 The students say nothing.	The students' understanding of the target language should be developed before speaking.
3 The teacher gives the commands quite quickly.	Students can initially learn one part of the language rapidly by moving their bodies.

4	The teacher sits down and issues commands to the volunteers.	The imperative is a powerful linguistic device through which the teacher can direct student behavior.
5	The teacher directs students other than the volunteers.	Students can learn through observing actions as well as by performing the actions themselves.
6	The teacher introduces new commands after she is satisfied that the first six have been mastered.	It is very important that students feel successful. Feelings of success and low anxiety facilitate learning.
7	The teacher changes the order of the commands.	Students should not be made to memorize fixed routines.
8	When the students make an error, the teacher repeats the command while acting it out.	Correction should be carried out in an unobtrusive manner.
9	The teacher gives the students commands they have not heard before.	Students must develop flexibility in understanding novel combinations of target language chunks. They need to understand more than the exact sentences used in training. Novelty is also motivating.
10	The teacher says, 'Jump to the desk.' Everyone laughs.	Language learning is more effective when it is fun.
11	The teacher writes the new commands on the board.	Spoken language should be emphasized over written language.
12	A few weeks later, a student who has not spoken before gives commands.	Students will begin to speak when they are ready.
13	A student says, 'Shake *hand with your neighbor.'	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.

Reviewing the Principles

We will next turn to our 10 questions in order to increase our understanding of Total Physical Response.

1 What are the goals of teachers who use TPR?

Teachers who use TPR believe in the importance of having their students enjoy their experience of learning to communicate in another language. In fact, TPR was developed in order to reduce the stress people feel when they are studying other languages and thereby encourage students to persist in their study beyond a beginning level of proficiency.

The way to do this, Asher believes, is to base foreign language learning upon the way children learn their native language.

2 What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students?

Initially, the teacher is the director of all student behavior. The students are imitators of her nonverbal model. At some point (usually after 10–20 hours of instruction), some students will be ‘ready to speak.’ At that point, there will be a role reversal with individual students directing the teacher and the other students.

3 What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process?

The first phase of a lesson is one of modeling. The teacher issues commands to a few students, then performs the actions with them. In the second phase, these same students demonstrate that they can understand the commands by performing them alone. The observers also have an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding.

The teacher next recombines elements of the commands to have students develop flexibility in understanding unfamiliar utterances. These commands, which students perform, are often humorous.

After learning to respond to some oral commands, the students learn to read and write them. When students are ready to speak, they become the ones who issue the commands. After students begin speaking, activities expand to include skits and games.

4 What is the nature of student–teacher interaction? What is the nature of student–student interaction?

The teacher interacts with the whole group of students and with individual students. Initially, the interaction is characterized by the teacher speaking and the students responding nonverbally. Later on, the students become more verbal and the teacher responds nonverbally.

Students perform the actions together. Students can learn by watching each other. At some point, however, Asher believes observers must demonstrate their understanding of the commands in order to retain them.

As students begin to speak, they issue commands to one another as well as to the teacher.

5 How are the feelings of the students dealt with?

One of the main reasons TPR was developed was to reduce the stress people feel when studying other languages. One of the primary ways this is accomplished is to allow learners to speak when they are ready. Forcing them to speak before then will only create anxiety. Also, when students do begin to speak, perfection should not be expected.

Another way to relieve anxiety is to make language learning as enjoyable as possible. The use of zany commands and humorous skits are two ways of showing that language learning can be fun.

Finally, it is important that there not be too much modeling, but that students not be too rushed either. Feelings of success and low anxiety facilitate learning.

6 How is the language viewed? How is culture viewed?

Just as with the acquisition of the native language, the oral modality is primary. Culture is the lifestyle of people who speak the language natively.

7 What areas of language are emphasized? What language skills are emphasized?

Vocabulary and grammatical structures are emphasized over other language areas. These are embedded within imperatives. The imperatives are 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.

Understanding the spoken word should precede its production. The spoken language is emphasized over written language. Students often do not learn to read the commands they have already learned to perform until after 10 hours of instruction.

8 What is the role of the students' native language?

TPR is usually introduced in the student's native language. After the introduction, rarely would the native language be used. Meaning is made clear through body movements.

9 How is evaluation accomplished?

Teachers will know immediately whether or not students understand by observing their students' actions. Formal evaluations can be conducted simply by commanding individual students to perform a series of actions. As students become more advanced, their performance of skits they have created can become the basis for evaluation.

10 How does the teacher respond to student errors?

It is expected that students will make errors when they first begin speaking. Teachers should be tolerant of them and only correct major errors. Even these should be corrected unobtrusively. As students get more advanced, teachers can 'fine tune'—correct more minor errors.

Reviewing the Techniques

The major technique, as we saw in the lesson we observed, is the use of commands to direct behavior. Asher acknowledges that, although this technique is powerful, a variety of activities is preferred for maintaining student interest. A detailed description of using commands is provided below. If you find some of the principles of Total Physical Response to be of interest, you may wish to devise your own techniques to supplement this one.

- **Using Commands to Direct Behavior**

It should be clear from the class we observed that the use of commands is the major teaching technique of TPR. The commands are given to get students to perform an action; the action makes the meaning of the command clear. Since Asher suggests keeping the pace lively, it is necessary for a teacher to plan in advance just which commands she will introduce in a lesson. If the teacher tries to think them up as the lesson progresses, the pace will be too slow.

At first, to clarify meaning, the teacher performs the actions with the students. Later the teacher directs the students alone. The students' actions tell the teacher whether or not the students understand.

As we saw in the lesson we observed, Asher advises teachers to 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 believes it is very important that the students feel successful. Therefore, the teacher should not introduce new commands too fast. It is recommended that a teacher present three commands at a time. After students feel successful with these, three more can be taught.

Although we were only able to observe one beginning class, people always ask just how much of a language can be taught through the use of imperatives. Asher claims that all grammar features can be communicated through imperatives. To give an example of a more advanced lesson, one might teach the past tense as follows:

TEACHER: Ingrid, walk to the blackboard.

(Ingrid gets up and walks to the blackboard.)

TEACHER: Class, if Ingrid walked to the blackboard, stand up.

(The class stands up.)

TEACHER: Ingrid, write your name on the blackboard.

(Ingrid writes her name on the blackboard.)

TEACHER: Class, if Ingrid wrote her name on the blackboard,
sit down.

(The class sits down.)

- **Role Reversal**

Students command their teacher and classmates to perform some actions. Asher says that students will want to speak after 10–20 hours of instruction, although some students may take longer. Students should not be encouraged to speak until they are ready.

- **Action Sequence**

At one point we saw the teacher give three connected commands. For example, the teacher told the students to point to the door, walk to the door, and touch the door. As the students learn more and more of the target language, a longer series of connected commands can be given, which together comprise a whole procedure. While we did not see a long action sequence in this very first class, a little later on students might receive the following instructions, which they act out:

Take out a pen.

Take out a piece of paper.

Write a letter. (imaginary)

Fold the letter.

Put it in an envelope.

Seal the envelope.

Write the address on the envelope.

Put a stamp on the envelope.

Mail the letter.

This series of commands is called an action sequence, or an ‘operation.’ Many everyday activities, like writing a letter, can be broken down into an action sequence that students can be asked to perform.

Conclusion

Now that we have had a chance to experience a Total Physical Response class and to examine its principles and techniques, you should try to think about how any of this will be of use to you in your own teaching. The teacher we observed was using TPR with Grade 5 children; however, this same method has been used with adult learners and younger children as well.

Ask yourself: Does it make any sense to delay the teaching of speaking the target language? Do you believe that students should not be encouraged to speak until they are ready to do so? Should a teacher overlook certain student errors in the beginning? Which, if any, of the other principles do you agree with?

Would you use the imperative to present the grammatical structures and vocabulary of the target language? Do you believe it is possible to teach all grammatical features through the imperative? Do you think that accompanying language with action aids recall? Would you teach reading and writing in the manner described in this lesson? Would you want to adapt any of the techniques of TPR to your teaching situation? Can you think of any others you would create that would be consistent with the principles presented here?

Activities

A Check your understanding of Total Physical Response.

- 1 Asher believes that additional language instruction can and should be modeled on native language acquisition. What are some characteristics of his method that are similar to the way children acquire their native language?
- 2 One of the principles of TPR is that when student anxiety is low, language learning is enhanced. How does this method lower student anxiety?

B Apply what you have understood about Total Physical Response.

- 1 Although the teacher uses imperatives, she does so in a gentle, pleasant way, the way a parent would (usually) do with a child. Her voice, facial expression, and manner are kind. Practice giving the commands in this chapter in this way.
- 2 A lot of target language structures and vocabulary can be taught through the imperative. Plan part of a TPR lesson in which the present continuous tense, or another structure in the target language, is introduced.

- 3 In the action sequence (operation) that we looked at, the teacher had the students pretend to write and mail a letter. Think of three other common activities which could be used as action sequences in the classroom. Make a list of commands for each one.

References/Additional Resources

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