

**KRISTINA KOH SAVOVIĆ**

Gimnazija “Veljko Petrović”

Sombor

**PREGLEDNI ČLANAK**

**PROFESSIONAL PAPER**

UDK: 371.3 :: 811.111

BIBLID: 0353-7129,17(2012)2,p.201–210

## **TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE AS A METHOD OF LANGUAGE TEACHING**

**Summary:** This paper deals with a study of application of the Total Physical Response method in the English language teaching and its effects on language acquisition. After the introductory part, basic principles and detailed explanation of the method are given. The following part covers objectives of Total Physical Response and activities included in its application. A special technique developed from Total Physical Response, Total Physical Response Storytelling, is explained separately. The final part includes the concluding remarks which summarize the benefits of the method as well as some proposition for its application in a classroom.

Key words: language, acquisition, learning, teaching, method, physical activity, understanding, application.

### **1 INTRODUCTION TO TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE**

*I hear and I forget. I see and I remember.*

*I do and I understand.*

Chinese proverb

An approach to second language acquisition is the Total Physical Response (later referred to as TPR). It combines speech and action and attempts to teach a language through physical activity. TPR is a stress-free approach as part of which teachers give physical and verbal commands for students who are to respond with appropriate

actions. The originator of TPR, Dr James J. Asher, is a professor of psychology at San Jose State University, California. He says that it is a method of teaching language which uses physical movement to react to verbal input in order to reduce students' inhibitions and lower their affective filter.

Nevertheless, the idea that lies behind TPR, is not completely new. It draws on several traditions, some of which are developmental psychology, learning theory, humanistic pedagogy and language teaching procedures proposed by Harold and Dorothy Palmer in 1925. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 87)

The "trace theory" of memory in psychology 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. Tracing activities, especially those which combine verbal rehearsal and motor activity, increase the probability of successful recall. This is exactly how TPR works. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 87)

Asher thinks that a method that does not demand production and that involves movements reduces learner's stress and creates positive emotions, hence facilitates learning. This is how TPR is linked to humanistic psychology. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 87)

The Comprehension Approach, named like this because of the importance it gives to listening comprehension, is an approach in foreign language teaching with which TPR is linked because of the mutual emphasis on developing comprehension skills before the learner is taught to speak. In the 1960s and 1970s, as opposed to most of the methods which have student speaking from the first day, research gave rise to the hypothesis that language learning should start with understanding and later proceed to production. Only after the student internalizes an extensive map of how the target language works, speaking will appear. That speech will not be perfect at first, but it will gradually become more target-like. (Larsen –Freeman 2000: 107)

The use of physical action and the importance of comprehension in teaching a foreign language have a long tradition. Back in the nineteenth century Gouin emphasized a situationally based teaching strategy where a chain of action verbs served as the basis for introducing and practicing new language items. In the book "English Through Actions" (1925, ultimately reissued as Palmer and Palmer in 1959) Palmer experimented with an action-based teaching strategy. He claimed that there is no successful method of teaching a foreign language if the first period of teaching does not include classroom work which consists of the carrying out by the pupils of orders issued by the teacher. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 88)

## 2 THEORY OF LANGUAGE

As the central linguistic motif around which language use and learning can be organized for Asher is the verb, precisely the verb in the imperative. He thinks that a language is made of abstractions and nonabstractions, where the latter are represented by concrete nouns and imperative verbs. He claims that a "detailed cognitive map"

and “the grammatical structure of a language” can be acquired without using abstractions. Nevertheless, Asher does not elaborate on the relation between comprehension, production and communication, even though in advanced TPR lessons imperatives are used to initiate different speech acts, such as apologies and requests. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 88-89)

### 3 THEORY OF LEARNING

Language learning theories that are behind Asher’s theory are actually reminiscent of the views of some behavioural psychologists. In particular, Arthur Jensen described the development of verbal learning in children as a seven-stage model, where the first stage is so called Sv – R type learning, where Sv refers to a verbal stimulus and R refers to the physical movement a child makes in response to the verbal stimulus, and it represents the simplest form of verbal behaviour. Such simple stimulus-response models of language acquisition have since been abandoned, Nevertheless, Asher still sees it as the learning theory underlying language teaching pedagogy. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 89)

Asher has demonstrated how to apply TPR for best results at more than 500 schools and universities. It has proved to be very successful. He explains that the success of TPR depends on three elements:

- a) it is aptitude free, which means it is effective for everybody in the normal range of intelligence;
- b) it works with both children and adults, there are no age barriers;
- c) it is stress-free, because it is “brain compatible”, as opposed to “brain antagonistic” approaches which start with production, memorization or grammar instruction, which are stressful for most people who learn foreign languages.

Asher thinks that first and second language learning are parallel processes. As such, second language learning and teaching should reflect some natural processes of the first language acquisition. They are as follow:

- a) Children develop listening competence before they develop the ability to speak. They can understand utterances that they cannot produce. Asher thinks that during this period of listening a mental “blueprint” of the language is made which will make it possible to produce spoken language later.
- b) Children acquire ability in listening comprehension because they are required to respond physically to spoken language.
- c) When the foundation in listening comprehension is formed, speech evolves. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 90)

Therefore, for a person acquiring another language success can be assured if comprehension is developed before speaking. Infants can never acquire speaking be-

fore comprehension, it always comes first, and speaking comes some year later. When you observe babies acquiring their first language, what can be seen is unique “language-body conversations” between the caretaker and the baby. The transactions that happen, start immediately after birth with utterances such as: “Look at Daddy! Look at Mum!” The eyes of the baby turn in the direction of the voice. Later, the utterances become more complex: “Take my hand! Give me the toy!”. The caretaker speaks and the baby responds with the appropriate physical actions, such as looking, grasping, etc. This is the reason why Asher calls these transactions “language-body conversations”. This critical period, during which the baby is silent, lasts for about two years. What happens during that time is that the baby is internalizing the sounds and patterns of the language. Speaking occurs only after the child internalizes an enormous sample of the language. In all the human history there is no record of the deviation from this sequence for language acquisition. According to Asher this works the same way for the second language. It is crucial that listening is accompanied by physical movement, while speech will come spontaneously when the basic foundations of language are established through listening training. The only change is the fact that children and adults acquire the sounds and patterns of a second language faster because they have much more physical responses compared with infants.

The second reason is the fact that talking and comprehension are located in different parts of brain. Asher says that motor activity is a right-brain function and it should come before language processing, which happens in the left part of our brain. Broca’s area is located in the frontal lobe of the left brain. It is where the talking comes from. In cases when there is a damage in Broca’s area, a person may understand what people are saying, but he/she cannot speak. Wernicke’s area is located in the temporal lobe and it is where comprehension takes place. If it is somehow damaged, a person can speak, but has difficulty understanding what others are saying. According to Asher, this is very important for language instruction. For instance, when the instructor in a traditional class asks students to listen and repeat after him, this may cause brain overload because both the frontal and the temporal lobe activate at the same time which results in slow-motion learning with short-term retention.

This is why TPR is directed to right-brain learning, as opposed to most of the other second language teaching methods which are directed to left-brain learning. Asher’s belief, which holds that children learn a language by acquiring it through motor movements – right-hemisphere activities, is not new. It draws on work by Piaget. Similarly to children, the adults should use right-hemisphere motor activities in learning languages as well. Only after a sufficient amount of right-hemisphere learning has taken place, the left hemisphere will produce language. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 91)

Often, in traditional classes, teachers use translation. Asher explains that it does not help most students because there is no long-term understanding. According to him, a student’s left-brain perceives a translation of a word as a “lie”, because his/her experience knows another word, in their own language, to validate to be the true word for something. For example, if a teacher points to the desk and claims that this is a desk,

in the student's brain it is absurd, because they know what the word in their mother tongue for a desk is, and they will not believe in the assertions given by the teacher. Therefore, by giving a translation of a word, the teacher made an assertion, which is erased the very same moment that the student leaves the classroom.

On the other hand, by using TPR we create experiences in the classroom which are "believable", and this is what makes for long-term comprehension. If a student follows the teacher's directions, and does what he/she is told to do, their brain realizes that it is true, that it is a fact, and therefore stores it in long-term memory. For example, the teacher gives direction "Stand!" and everybody stands up along with the teacher. The student's brain processes information in the following way: if he/she actually stood up when the teacher gave the direction "Stand!", then it must be a fact, it must be true. Since this actually happened, the student stores this in long-term memory. This is how TPR achieves long-term retention in a few trials, sometimes even in only one. "... people learn more by doing things themselves rather than by being told about them." (Scrivener 1994: 21)

What Asher stresses is that the key to successful application of TPR is understanding of brain lateralization – you have to know when to play to the left-brain and when to the right-brain. Only after the student has understood, you can move over into Broca's area of the left brain to do traditional exercises in speaking, reading and writing. After that, go back to the right brain with TPR again to understand another sample, and move over to left brain to do speaking, reading and writing. And repeat it over and over again.

But you should also be aware of, so called, over-modelling. If the students seem to understand what you are trying to teach in one or two exposures, you should not continue to model. The reason is that this will probably exhaust everyone, even yourself. In that case it is advisable to ask whether either student would like to try it alone. The objective in this approach is minimum input from the teacher and maximum output from the students. Asher compares it to making a theatre play and sees a teacher as a director of a play who only shows the actors, in our case the students, what to do once or twice, and leaves it to them to get it and to practice.

Part of TPR's success probably lies in the fact that it is stress free. Students learn more when they are relaxed. There is a mental barrier between a student and the information, which is called the affective filter. When the student is nervous or uncomfortable it is raised. And in the situations when it is high, students find it harder to understand, process and remember information. Language classes are often full of anxiety and stress due to students' fear of telling something wrong or not knowing what and how to tell. TPR does not require a spoken response from the students, they do not have to produce language in TPR classes. Furthermore, they always understand what is happening during TPR practice, it is less threatening than a traditional language class, and in that way the affective filter is lowered, so students feel more comfortable and confident. By focusing on meaning, rather than on language forms, learners are liberated from stressful situations and able to focus on learning. The teachers who use

TPR believe that it is extremely important that their students enjoy learning a foreign language, and it is only possible if it is stress free.

#### **4 OBJECTIVES**

The general objective of TPR is to teach oral proficiency at a beginning level and the ultimate aim is to teach basic speaking skills. Any TPR course has an aim to produce learners who will uninhibitedly communicate intelligible to a native speaker. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 91)

Asher suggests that TPR should especially be used if you have students at the initial stage of language acquisition, because then sounds and patterns of the new language can be internalized rapidly through language-body conversations. At that stage long-term retention is great, as well. This is what is very motivating for the students as well as for the teacher, which is very important, because there are not many learning models which are concerned with the motivation of the teacher.

Very soon after that first stage, after some time of understanding the second language through physical movement, which is usually ten to twenty hours, students spontaneously begin to speak. It cannot be forced, students begin speaking only when they are ready, and it usually appears naturally, as a playful activity. When speaking finally appears, it is not perfect, it has many mistakes, but, according to Asher, it will gradually shape itself in the direction of the native speaker, just as infants shape their language when they acquire it.

#### **5 TYPES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND THE SYLLABUS**

The main classroom activity in TPR is *imperative drill*. Drills are mainly used to elicit physical action on the part of the learners. There are also role plays, which center on everyday situations, and slide shows, which provide a visual center for teacher's narration, and are followed by commands or questions. Reading and writing may also be used, often as follow-ups to oral imperative drills and to consolidate structures and vocabulary. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 93)

It has already been said that TPR requires initial attention to meaning. This is why grammar is taught inductively. Grammatical features and vocabulary items are selected according to the situations in which they can be used in the classroom. The ease with which they can be used is also an important factor, because, according to Asher, if students do not learn an item rapidly, probably they are not ready for it. In that case, the teacher should try to teach that item some time later. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 92)

Even though Asher advocates the imperative as the main format of training, he also says that it is important to maintain the students' interest. That means that im-

perative may be used in combination with other techniques, which will depend on the instructor and the students. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 92)

## 6 LEARNER'S AND TEACHER'S ROLES

The main roles of learners in TPR are those of listener and performer. They listen and then respond physically to the teacher's commands. They can respond both individually and collectively. They are also expected not only to recognize and respond to novel combinations of previously taught items, but to produce new combinations on their own. They are not forced to speak, but encouraged to produce speech only when they feel ready. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 93)

The teachers, on the other hand, play an active role in TPR. They are those who decide on the content of learning, who present the new materials and select supporting materials. They should always be well prepared and have detailed lesson plans. This is important because the action in a TPR classroom is usually fast-moving, and there is no time for spontaneity. For the same reason it is advisable to write out the exact utterances you will be using. (Richards and Roberts 1986: 93-94)

Although the teachers use commands to present the language, it is very important that the commands are given gently and pleasantly. Teachers should use the tone of their voice, posture and facial expressions to show that they are the students' friends and in that way make the learning easier.

The main role of the teacher in a TPR classroom is to provide opportunities for learning, which means the best kind of exposure to language. In that way the teacher controls the language input the learners receive, and provide the raw material for the "cognitive map" in the learners' minds. Another teacher's role is to allow learners to develop speaking abilities at their own pace.

In giving feedback to learners, teachers should refrain from too much correction in the initial stages and certainly not interrupt to correct mistakes. They will know immediately whether or not students understand by observing their actions. Some evaluations may be conducted by giving commands to individual students to perform a series of actions. Later, teachers should intervene more often, in order to make the learners' speech "fine tuned". (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 94)

There are also some mistakes that a teacher of a TPR lesson can make. First of all, the teachers may underestimate the difficulties of learning a foreign language because of the "illusion of simplicity". This may lead to progressing at too fast a pace and failing to provide a gradual transition from one teaching stage to another. It is also important that the students feel successful, which is another reason why the teacher should not introduce new commands too fast. Also, the teachers should be careful when they correct students' mistakes, because their tolerance for errors may become too narrow. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 94)

What makes the teacher's role in a TPR lesson even harder is the fact that there is no basic text in a TPR course. The teacher's voice, actions and gestures are sufficient basis for classroom activities for beginners. However, materials and realia play an important role in the later stages of learning. Then the teacher may use common classroom objects, like books, pens, furniture and anything that he/she finds useful. (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 94-95)

Nevertheless, after the students make the transition to speaking, reading and writing TPR can still be used. It is very advisable to use TPR to help students internalize some grammatical features. There are numerous ways of how to use TPR to teach grammar. For example, you may teach the possessive case by giving some directions such as: "Mary, put Sam's book on the desk." And the student performs the action and in that way understands and remembers it. When all the students can respond to commands correctly, one of them can then start giving instructions to other classmates. Although commands are an easy way to make students move about and loosen up, it is not only the imperative mood that is used in a TPR class. More complex syntax can easily be incorporated into the imperative. Interrogatives are also very useful; for instance a teacher may ask a question, e.g. "Where is the pencil?", and the student points to the pencil. According to Asher, all grammatical features can be taught through imperatives. Here is an example of how the form of the past tense might be introduced:

*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.) (Larsen-Freeman 2000: 116)

Furthermore, there is an interesting finding: when TPR is the mode of instruction adults greatly outperform children of all ages. Also, older children, of the sixth, seventh and eighth grade, outperform young children, of the first, second and third grade. Still, children younger than puberty are accent-free in speaking a second language, they have a "biological" advantage in acquiring a native pronunciation of the language they are learning.

Some authors believe that TPR has limited use when it comes to more advanced stages, although Asher claims that it can be used in all stages of language learning, if included together with other methods.

## 7 TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE STORYTELLING

"We all need stories for our minds as much as we need food for our bodies." (Wright, 1995: 3) More than for us, stories are important for our children, they help them to understand the world around them and to share it with others. Stories are mo-

tivating and they offer a major and constant source of language experience. (Wright 1995: 3)

Total physical response storytelling (later referred to as TPRS) is an extension of James Asher's TPR approach to teaching foreign languages. This technique was developed by Blaine Ray, a Spanish teacher, and it is very popular with teachers and students. It allows active participation of all students even the weaker ones and it does not involve any course books or writing, at least in early stages. TPRS strategies make use of vocabulary, previously taught using TPR, by incorporating it into stories that students hear, watch, act out, retell, revise, read and finally even write and rewrite. (Reyhner 1999: 53)

TPR Storytelling begins with the teacher introducing the vocabulary. He/she supports comprehension by using pictures and objects in order to explain parts of the story. Both the teacher and the students use gestures to facilitate comprehension. Then the teacher asks questions about the story, and those are the questions that contain the vocabulary previously taught. Students are not required to memorize the story but are encouraged to be inventive and construct their own variations. They either act out certain parts or write down their own versions. Thus, creativity is supported and productive language skills are activated. In that way students rapidly and effortlessly acquire language.

## 8 CONCLUSION

All in all, there are numerous benefits of TPR, the most important of which are:

- a) Rapid understanding of English regardless of academic aptitude. Due to this, any child, teenager or adult in the normal range of intelligence is able to understand the target language in a few trials, sometimes even in the first one;
- b) long-term retention
- c) it is stress-free tool both for the teacher and students.

It can also be easily applied in mixed-level classes where more advanced students act as assistants to the teacher in introducing new vocabulary. Ramiro Garcia, a teacher and an author who has been successfully applying TPR for more than 20 years, has had numerous mixed-level groups and he claims that TPR is the best way to teach such a class because then the 'advanced' students act as teacher's assistants in introducing new vocabulary, and it is well known that the best way to learn anything is to play the role of teacher.

Furthermore, it is very important to mention that, even though its first and original application is in teaching foreign languages, TPR also has the application in school programs other than language acquisition. It is only important to bear in mind that you have to move information from the left to the right brain and back again for im-

mediate understanding. In this, computers can be of great help. Using virtual reality, now people can see some concepts that were static in textbooks move on the computer screen. And when people see something move they understand how it works.

Although Asher and his followers consider TPR an approach to second language acquisition which should be used in a classroom without any other method, they also suggested that it could be used in association with other methods and techniques. Indeed, practitioners of TPR today use it more as a type of classroom activity and "many successful communicative, interactive classrooms utilize TPR activities to provide both auditory input and physical activity." (Brown 2000: 107)

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reyhner, J. et al. (eds). (1999). *Revitalizing Indigenous Languages*. Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University.
- Richards, J. and Rodgers, T. (1986). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scrivener, J. (1994). *Learning Teaching*. Oxford: Heinemann English Language Teaching
- Wright, A. (1995). *Storytelling with Children*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Primljeno: 21.05.2012.

Odobreno za štampu: 15.06.2012.

---

**Rezime:** Ovaj rad se bavi proučavanjem primene metode totalnog fizičkog odgovora u nastavi engleskog jezika i njenim uticajem na usvajanje jezika. Nakon uvodnog dela, dati su osnovni principi i detaljan opis ove metode. Sledeći deo obuhvata ciljeve metode totalnog fizičkog odgovora i aktivnosti koje se javljaju prilikom njene primene. Posebna tehnika, razvijena iz metode totalnog fizičkog odgovora – totalni fizički odgovor u pričanju priča, posebno je opisana. Poslednji deo rada obuhvata završna razmatranja, u kojima su sumirane prednosti ove metode, kao i neki predlozi za njenu primenu u učionici.

**Ključne reči:** jezik, usvajanje, učenje, nastava, metoda, fizička aktivnost, razumevanje, primena.