

A Review of Total Physical Response

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Abstract

This review explores the theoretical foundations of TPR, including behaviorist theory, the critical period hypothesis, and trace theory, which collectively support the method's effectiveness in language acquisition. While TPR is particularly effective for young learners and beginners, it should be complemented with other teaching methods for more advanced language instruction. This review underscores TPR's valuable role in contemporary language education and advocates for its continued use alongside other integrative approaches.

Keywords

Total Physical Response; Foreign Language Teaching; Comprehension-based Learning.

1. Introduction

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a language teaching method developed by Dr. James Asher in the 1960s, premised on the relationship between language and physical movement. Asher, a professor of psychology, theorized that language learning is most effective when it incorporates physical activity, reflecting the natural language acquisition process seen in young children[1]. This method engages multiple senses, thereby enhancing memory and understanding. In this paper, we will delve into the theoretical foundations of TPR, evaluate its practical applications, discuss its strengths and limitations, and consider its place in contemporary language education.

2. Theoretical Basis of TPR

TPR is fundamentally rooted in several key theories of language acquisition and cognitive psychology. These include the behaviorist theory, the theory of the critical period, and the trace theory.

2.1. Behaviorist Theory

Behaviorism, championed by psychologists such as B.F. Skinner, emphasizes the role of stimulus and response in learning[2]. TPR aligns with this theory by using physical actions as responses to verbal commands, reinforcing the connection between words and their meanings through repetition and practice. This method operates on the principle that physical movement can serve as a form of feedback, reinforcing the language learned and making it more memorable.

2.2. Theory of the Critical Period

The critical period hypothesis, proposed by Eric Lenneberg, suggests that there is a window during early childhood when language acquisition occurs most naturally and efficiently. TPR mirrors the natural process through which children learn their first language: they listen and respond physically before they begin to speak[3]. By creating a learning environment that mimics this natural acquisition process, TPR leverages the cognitive flexibility and capacity for language absorption that is most prominent during this critical period.

2.3. Trace Theory

Asher's trace theory posits that memory traces (or paths) are formed through the physical actions associated with learning. According to this theory, combining physical movement with language input creates stronger and more durable memory traces. This multimodal approach (engaging auditory, visual, and kinesthetic senses) makes recall more effective. Essentially, the physical response acts as a mnemonic device, aiding in the retention and recall of vocabulary and language structures.

3. Practical Applications of TPR

TPR is primarily used in teaching foreign languages, particularly at the beginner level. Its methodology involves the instructor giving commands in the target language, and students responding with physical actions. This approach emphasizes comprehension before production, aligning with natural language learning processes[4].

3.1. Classroom Implementation

Language input and output are guarantees for efficient learning, and teachers should create as many contexts as possible for students to learn in. If students learn without context and only absorb boring knowledge, they will not be able to flexibly apply knowledge for effective communication when outputting[5].

In a typical TPR classroom, the instructor might begin with simple commands like "stand up," "sit down," or "touch your nose." As students become more comfortable, the complexity of commands increases, incorporating more vocabulary and varied sentence structures. This progression allows students to build their language skills gradually, with a solid foundation of understanding reinforced by physical actions. Learners' role in TPR is to listen and perform what the teacher says, they monitor and evaluate their own progress. They are encouraged to speak when they feel ready to speak. This is when a sufficient basis in language has been internalized. While learning a language, children focus on movements, so they acquire the language unconsciously, which reduce stress of learning a language just like Krashen mentions as Affective Filter Hypothesis.

3.2. Benefits for Different Learners

TPR has proven particularly effective for young learners, who naturally enjoy physical activity and are more likely to stay engaged when lessons are interactive. TPR activities will ensure that young learners can hear the new vocabulary in a meaningful context and respond nonverbally first. However, it has also shown benefits for adult learners, especially those who might be apprehensive about traditional language learning methods. The physical component of TPR can reduce anxiety and make the learning process more enjoyable and less intimidating.

3.3. Integration with Other Methods

While TPR is effective on its own, it is often used in conjunction with other teaching methods to provide a more comprehensive language learning experience. Because TPR can play a crucial role in the output of knowledge, it can comprehensively showcase the key and difficult points of teaching. Even students with poor foundations can delve deeper into classroom teaching through participation in activities. For instance, TPR can be paired with storytelling, role-playing, or conversational practice to enhance both comprehension and speaking skills. This integrative approach ensures that students are not only able to understand and respond to commands but also to engage in meaningful communication.

4. Commentary

4.1. Strengths of TPR

One of the primary strengths of TPR is its ability to make language learning a multi-sensory experience. By engaging students physically, it enhances retention and recall, as the combination of auditory and kinesthetic input creates stronger memory traces. Additionally, TPR's emphasis on comprehension before production reduces the pressure on learners to speak before they are ready, which can decrease anxiety and increase confidence.

TPR is also highly engaging and interactive, making it particularly suitable for young learners who benefit from movement and play. Its clear structure and predictable format provide a safe and supportive learning environment, where students can comfortably acquire new language skills at their own pace. It can effectively concentrate students' attention and enable them to participate in classroom activities at all times, thus achieving good teaching results. Teachers use full body movements for teaching, and students receive teaching information and provide feedback, expressing the learned knowledge in the form of body movements. In this process, students' sports intelligence has been fully exercised and developed, and they can easily learn English through experience and activities. Through teacher-student interaction, students can effectively grasp knowledge, and teachers can accurately evaluate the learning situation of the class based on student feedback.

4.2. Limitations of TPR

Despite its many advantages, TPR is not without its limitations. One of the main criticisms is that it is most effective for teaching concrete vocabulary and simple commands but less so for abstract concepts and complex grammatical structures. This limitation means that TPR may need to be supplemented with other teaching methods as students progress to higher proficiency levels.

Another limitation is that TPR heavily relies on the physical presence and active participation of the instructor, which may not be feasible in all educational settings. In large classes or in situations where the teacher cannot interact individually with each student, the effectiveness of TPR can be diminished. Besides, the individual comprehensive quality requirements for teachers are high, and not every school can have such teaching conditions.

Furthermore, the physical nature of TPR may not be suitable for all learners, particularly those with physical disabilities or those who are uncomfortable with movement-based activities. In such cases, adaptations or alternative methods need to be considered to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn.

Numerous studies have supported the effectiveness of TPR in enhancing vocabulary retention and comprehension. Research has shown that students who learn through TPR often outperform their peers who learn through more traditional methods, particularly in the early stages of language acquisition. However, the evidence on its long-term effectiveness and impact on speaking and writing skills is less conclusive, indicating a need for further research in these areas.

5. Conclusion

Total Physical Response remains a valuable tool in the language teacher's repertoire, particularly for beginners and young learners. Its emphasis on kinesthetic learning and natural language acquisition processes makes it a powerful method for enhancing comprehension and retention. However, its limitations suggest that it should be used as part of a broader, more integrative approach to language teaching. The TPR teaching method can achieve better teaching results than traditional teaching methods. The TPR teaching method can stimulate

students' interest in learning English. In order to provide students with the best learning methods and cultivate their target language abilities, such research is necessary.

By combining TPR with other methods, educators can create a more balanced and comprehensive language learning experience that addresses the diverse needs of their students. As with any teaching method, the key to success lies in understanding its strengths and limitations and adapting it to suit the specific context and goals of the learners.

In the evolving landscape of language education, TPR continues to offer valuable insights and strategies for making language learning an engaging, effective, and enjoyable experience. As we continue to explore and refine our understanding of how languages are best learned and taught, TPR will undoubtedly remain an important part of the conversation.

References

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