



Total Physical Response

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Abstract Total Physical Response is a language teaching method emerged in 1970s, created by J.E. Asher. This method attempts to adapt the process of infants' first language acquisition, into the teaching of second and foreign language. Asher claims that kids acquire their first language by listening to their parents commands, comprehending, executing, and then uttering the words. It implicates in the creation of language teaching material in form of lists of imperative sentences graded based on the grammatical complexity, which causes TPR seems to be a grammar based method. Attempts to imitate first language acquisition in second or foreign language classes practically requires the teacher to demonstrate at the same time as uttering commands to be acted by the student, in which the students are not required to repeat the words. It is considered as the reflection of what happens when children communicate with their parents. In spite of the deep first language acquisition adoption, J.E. Asher claims that TPR teaching practice is based on three principles which cover the relationship between physical and brain activity, involvement of left brain and right brain, and creation of free stress learning atmosphere.

Key terms: *physical; brain activity; response; command; TPR;*

Abstrak Total Physical Response merupakan metode pembelajaran bahasa yang muncul pada tahun 1970an, diciptakan oleh J. E. Asher. Metode ini berupaya untuk mengimitasi perolehan bahasa pertama yang dialami oleh anak-anak kedalam pembelajaran bahasa kedua dan bahasa asing. Asher mengklaim bahwa anak-anak memperoleh bahasa dengan menerima perintah-perintah dari orang tuanya, memahami, melaksanakan, baru mengucapkannya. Hal ini berimbas kepada pengembangan bahan ajar yang berbentuk daftar kalimat-kalimat perintah yang berjenjang menurut tingkat kerumitan grammatika, sehingga pada satu sisi terlihat seolah-olah TPR sebagai

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sebuah metode berbasis tata bahasa. Upaya untuk mengimitasi perolehan bahasa di dalam kegiatan belajar mengajar mensyaratkan guru untuk mendemonstrasikan dan memberikan perintah-perintah untuk dilaksanakan oleh siswa, dimana siswa tidak harus mengucapkan atau mengulangi perkataannya, dan hal itu dianggap sebagai refleksi dari apa yang terjadi saat anak-anak berkomunikasi dengan orang tuanya. Meskipun demikian, J.E Asher menambahkan bahwa pembelajaran dalam metode TPR mengacu pada tiga teori yang meliputi keterpaduan aktivitas fisik dengan aktivitas otak, keseimbangan dan pelibatan otak kiri dan otak kanan, serta penciptaan situasi dan kegiatan belajar yang bebas stress.

Kata kunci: *physical; brain activity; response; command; TPR;*

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INTRODUCTION

This method was established by J. E. Asher in early 1970s after doing a lot of experiments on it in 1960s¹. Asher himself was actually not a linguistic expert or a language educator; he was a professor in psychology who was interested in applying theory of psychology in language teaching. TPR was one of the methods emerged in early 1970s² as reaction to the former grammar based methods; GTM and ALM, which are judged to be meaningless and uncommunicative in term of language materials and activities.

Important concern in language teaching in 1970s was the presence of meaningfulness and communicativeness in the in lesson, both in the material and learning process. Meaningfulness refers to whether the material and learning activities have something to do with reality. It should contain things, texts and communication activities that we can encounter in the real world. The communicativeness concerns with whether the lessons expose students to be able to communicate, use real language, and whether it is appropriate with the need of students in many related aspects, e.g. age, proficiency, environment and so on.

As logical consequence, the previous methods were exposed to major criticism. A few common critiques on materials and teaching practices of the

¹ Brown, Douglas, H. *Teaching By Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. Third Edition. Longman: London, 2007., pp. 30

² Richard, Jack C., and Willy, A. Renandya (Ed). *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Antology of Current Practice*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 2002, pp., 10

methods are: 1) GTM provides language teaching with grammar teaching and translation, which is far from meaningful, and the translation keeps the students further from speaking automatically, and 2) ALM promotes language teaching through repetition in order to create memory in students' mind, but the absence of context makes them seem to just be sentences without meaning, because the acts of speech performed in the classrooms are not in the actual situation and purpose. The experts consider them as 'forms' without meaning. To teach meaning, according to Asher, words and sentences have to be taken into physical actions. Words and sentences are understood through conducting physical activities which convey their meaning.

The Total Physical Response rapidly caught the interest of linguists and practitioners. The practices spread all over the world. TPR is accepted as useful activities upon the communicative approach, especially for teaching young learners. It even shares much similarity to the basic concepts of The Natural Approach, and adopted as one of its important activity. Although most methods rising between 1970 and 1980 lost popularity in the world of language teaching such as the Silent Way and Suggestopedia, the Total Physical Response stays strong and still continues to exist.

Asher and his followers claim that this method is suitable to teach language for all ages of learners. Based on their studies, they argue that the use of TPR is even more effective for adult than children. Meanwhile, in spite of the studies and suggestions, teachers make use of this method mostly for teaching language to children, not to adult. In one side, this placement is based on the children's level of cognition which is in 'concrete operation' level. Students at this age, according to majority of educational psychologists, are able to acquire knowledge through exposure to learning process providing real things and real activities. When TPR offers language teaching practices which promotes the use of real things and real actions, teachers accept and apply it to teach language for children. In other words, application of this method for teaching language to children is not because the teachers disagreed with Asher's and advocates recommendation, but due to the shake of children ability in learning based on the view of majority educational psychologists.

Although TPR is strong in contextualizing language items and building long-term memory and retention, it faces a number of drawbacks. Richard-Amato identifies a number of potential weaknesses that TPR may face as follows:

1. Teaching abstract concepts. It is difficult to present the abstract concepts in meaningful context as clear as real thing and real actions that Asher and his advocates are promoting. As a solution, Asher has tried to support it with translation which is not a suggested technique in TPR.
2. Lack of intrinsic sequencing. Although most materials can be presented in a certain order of sequence, significant part may lose it and be isolated from one another. Sequential order of certain material can also be nonsense when we try to relate them with human experience. For example, tips to get safe in a night house robbery. Students are asked to “switch off the lamp and then shout help”. The action can be conducted very smoothly in TPR; meanwhile human sense may protest it. Because if the situation is really happening in the real life, shouting will mean to give information to the robber about his position. And then, he or she is safe no more.
3. Lack of intrinsic motivation. Look again at the example above. When the teacher ask the students to “switch of the lamp and then shout help”, they may fail to understand the advantage of doing so other than just technique to learn language. Students may grunt: “Why should I do it in a bright safe day?”³

Responding to the weaknesses of TPR above, Kalivoda, Morain and Elkins (in Richard-Amato)⁴ suggested an alternative technique for working with imperative sentences and physical action, which was latter known as the Audio-Motor Unit. They attempt to present the commands with a real sequence centering on a single topic involving whatever realia available. Different from TPR, which is directly present language along with physical actions, the classroom technique in Audio-Motor Unit started with listening to an audio presenting about twenty commands. After listening, the activity continued with real sequence actions if possible, if not, the language can be presented through

³ Richard-Amato, Patricia A., *Making It Happen: From Interactive To Participatory Language Teaching*, New York: Pearson Education Inc: New York, 2003, pp.164

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

pantomime. The important points of Audio-Motor Unit are unity and sensibility of material and its classroom presentation, which TPR is lack in.

DISCUSSION

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a method in language teaching which attempts to develop language mastery and communication ability as impact of body movements as response to language cues. It is built around the coordination of speech and action⁵, in which vocabulary items paired with appropriate physical actions⁶, designed to reinforce comprehension on the items⁷, and then accompanied by language practice⁸. Meanings of language literally presented through physical demonstration with or to objects, and then students practice using the utterances after comprehending it. Students get the language by listening to the sayings, and they get meaning by seeing and doing the physical actions.

Other than TPR, linguists and practitioners also label this method as “Comprehension Approach”, because the main starting point for acquiring the language and communication ability is through comprehension. “Comprehension before production” is another well known jargon in TPR. Asher claims that acquisition of language is a linear progression with comprehension at the first place, and then production⁹. Practically, it puts the emphasis on students’ comprehension about every single language item, before they are expected to speak it. It is also actualization of what happen in nature, when children speak utterances in their language only after getting comprehension through lots of exposure of the use. Brown emphasizes that Asher puts the importance of the fact that children, in acquiring their first language, appear to

⁵ Richards, Jack C., and Theodore Rodgers. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Second Edition. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001., pp. 73

⁶ Nunan, David. *Language Teaching Methodology: A Book For Language Teachers*. Pearson Education Ltd: Kuala Lumpur, 2000., pp. 135

⁷ Bowen, Tim. *A Discussion of the Total Physical Response Approach to Language Teaching*. Retrieved from www.onestopenglish.com in April 25, 2019., at. 4.49 PM

⁸ Brown, Douglas. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Fifth Edition. Pearson Education Inc: New York, 2007., pp. 391

⁹ Asher, James J. *Future Directions for Fast Stress Free Learning on the Right Side of the Brain*. Sky Oaks Production, Inc: Los Gatos., 2001., pp. 4

do a lot of listening before they speak¹⁰. It only after the children get meanings, they will decide to speak in the language. Similarly, when learning a second or a foreign language, students must be exposed to comprehension stage before the oral stage.

1. Language theory

There is no specific language theory used as the basis of this method, but it is rather attached to the imitation of first language acquisition. The major premise is that all languages, including the second and foreign language should be learned the same way as children acquire their mother tongue. Asher asserts that upon observations, it is found that most infants learn through body movement, an intricate linguistic map of the way language is working preceding the talking stage. When talking appears, its fragment and distortions parallel to the stage of second or foreign language acquisition¹¹, therefore he suggested that foreign language instruction has to follow the same way,¹² and that it will enhance the students memory on the lessons.¹³

Richards and Rodgers lists the central processes of language acquisition in children which are fundamental to the TPR as follows:

- a. The development of listening skill precedes the ability to speak. At the prior stage of L1 acquisition, children begin to comprehend complex utterances which they cannot produce spontaneously.
- b. The ability of listening acquired because the children are required to listen to their parents' commands.
- c. When the basis of listening skill has been created, the oral communication ability will grow naturally and effortlessly¹⁴.

In the next turn, these basic claims imply on the teaching material and teaching technique in which students in the classroom listening to speech and looking at the teacher's physical conducts before doing speaking.

2. Learning theory

¹⁰ Loc cit

¹¹ Asher, James J., 2001, Op cit., pp. 4

¹² Nunan, David., 2000, Op cit., p. 134

¹³ Bowen, Tim. Op cit

¹⁴ Richards, Jack C., and Theodore Rodgers. *Op cit.*, pp. 73

Philosophically, according to Brown, even though the TPR emerged in 1970s the idea for learning through association with motor activity has risen even at the end of the nineteenth century¹⁵. The important part of Asher is making it practically applicable in the practice of language teaching, and fortunately well known and accepted worldwide. The coordination of language and physical conduct, according to Nunan, is along with the claim of recreating successful first language acquisition.¹⁶

While attempting to recreate the process of language acquisition to the practices of second and foreign language learning, according to Richards and Rodgers, Asher claims that the activities are based on the following theory:

- a. The bio program, it's the program which is based on the belief that learning activities is equivalent with the brain activities. While body is responding with actions, the brain is also responding with comprehension on the actions.
- b. Brain lateralization, it's the offer to make the learning activities relevant with the need of any parts of the brain functioning. The left brain is to think, the right brain is to store the knowledge. Left brain processes the knowledge in mind while conducting the actions and the right brain keep the knowledge inside.
- c. Reduction of stress, it psychologically proved that stress can decrease the ability of human being for logical thinking. The process of learning with TPR is done actively and kept to be ease, even happy. Such psychological conditions help the brain to process thinking, and if the students are depressed it causes their brain to downshift. In other words, being depressed makes their ability to think decline¹⁷.

In spite of the above claim, Diaz-Rico notes that TPR actually follows the behavioral teaching method, especially in the shaping the response and reinforcement¹⁸. The technical explanation for classroom application of TPR shows that teacher needs to model and remodel the speech and physical actions, and then students required to imitate. That kind of activities are undeniably

¹⁵ Brown, Douglass, H., Op cit, pp., 30

¹⁶ Nunan, David. 2000, Op cit., pp. 134

¹⁷ Richards, Jack and Theodore Rodgers. 2001, Op cit., pp. 74-75

¹⁸ Diaz-Rico, Lynne T. *Strategies of Teaching English Learners*. Second Edition. Allyn and Bacon: Boston, 2008, pp., 39

another model of drilling and repetition applied in ALM, even though TPR is superior in presenting contexts and meaning.

3. Principles

Celce-Murcia divides the approaches in language teaching into five major categories: cognitive, affective-humanistic, comprehension, and communicative approaches¹⁹. TPR is one that belongs to comprehension approach besides the Krashen's Natural Approach. She listed the features of comprehension approaches as follows:

- a. Listening comprehension is very essential, because it is the basis for development of speaking, reading and writing.
- b. Meaningful listening should be presented at first place, the students are expected to give non-verbal response in meaningful ways previous to language production
- c. Do not ask students to speak before they are ready to do so. Forcing students to speak is more influential to pronunciation rather than speaking
- d. Students are exposed to meaningful input just one level beyond the last
- e. Learning grammar will only make students able to monitor their performance, but it will give no contribution to their acquisition or spontaneous use of the language
- f. Correction to errors is not necessary and even it can be counterproductive. The important points are to make students understand the language, and their language understandable.
- g. If the teacher is not a native speaker, they will need to audio visual media to provide comprehensible input to the students²⁰.

Silver, et al, list a number of guidelines for good language learners which are very appropriately to be put as principles of TPR as follows:

- a. Students need to be exposed in a situation in which oral language meaning is instantly perceived and understood
- b. Silence is permitted and even posited as opportunity for the students to watch the effect of the language on the others physical movement

¹⁹ Celce-Murcia, M. (Ed). *Teaching English as Second or Foreign Language*. Harper and Collins: New York, 1991., pp. 8

²⁰ Ibid, pp. 7-8

- c. Comprehension is shown through successful physical demonstration cued by oral language
 - d. Emphasis on overall meaning rather than grammar
 - e. Material taken from daily life
 - f. Content should be usable outside the classroom²¹
4. Focus on Language Skills

There a number of jargons popular in TPR by which we can conclude what language skills it focuses on. "Comprehension before production" is the first jargon. It implies that students' understanding about language is prominent. At the same time, the process' principle is "listening before speaking" which means that TPR puts listening skill at the first place. Meanwhile, because the emphasis on listening is to make students attain comprehension, and then students are expected to speak after it, it is seen that listening is posited as the pathway to speaking rather than superior to it. Therefore, in conclusion, TPR focuses equally on listening and speaking.

5. Goal and Objectives

Total Physical Response in the current time is considerably unable to develop language proficiency at high level. It is only expected to develop students' language from beginner to intermediate. In the publication entitled "TPR Curriculum for Adult", Silver, et. al., put beginner level as the starting proficiency level for TPR program and suggest TPR to be not put as single activities for the curriculum, it must be combined with other appropriate practices²². It is compatible with Asher's suggestion that TPR can be a major activity or an effective supplement in the curriculum²³. In short, TPR should not be placed as the only learning strategy in developing a language teaching program. It must be accompanied with other kinds of activities appropriate with the type of the materials.

Based on the philosophy "speaking emerged" or "silence is permitted" in TPR, students do not need to be required to have an instant speaking. Therefore,

²¹ Silver, Margaret., Barbara Adelman and Elizabeth Price. *Total Physical Response (TPR): A Curriculum for Adult*. English Language and Literacy Center, St. Louis, MO 63105., 2003, pp. 2

²² Silver et al., 2003., Opcit, p....

²³ Asher, James J. 2001., Opcit., pp. 3

the main objective of TPR lessons is to make students comprehend the language that is being learned. Speaking activity is a not suggested alternative, however if it is possible in term of ability and hindrance of depression to students' part, speaking can be applied as partial way for examining the comprehension.

6. Learning Experience

Adapted from Richard-Amato, there are at least eight activities on the basis of the Total Physical Response, as follows:

- a. Pointing game. Students are ordered to point variety things or concepts that are being taught. They can be in the shape of realia (body parts, small things that can be taken into the classes, things and parts of the classrooms, and things that we can find outside the classroom), pictures (pictures of things, part of the things on pictures, and sequential pictures), strips of colorful paper, cards, and so on. Teacher can have the students point a specific parts or items from the whole.
- b. Identifying emotions. Soon after the students are considered successful in internalizing a number of expressions like 'cry', 'laugh', 'sneeze', 'angry' and so on. Teacher puts pictures of people or cartoon that express the emotions on the whiteboard, therefore the students are ordered to take pictures displaying a specific expressions.
- c. Putting on and off parts of things. One thing or more that possesses or consists of many parts are assembled or disassembled on teacher's direction. For example, a doll which wears variety clothes and accessories such as trousers', shirt, hat, necktie, jacket and shoes. Teacher asks students to put on and to put off the wears from and to the doll.
- d. Manipulating items. Teacher provides small items and put them in front of the students with variety types and colors. These can be used for teaching number, spatial relationship, and colors. Students take certain items in category of number, colors, and then put the things in certain positions.
- e. Bouncing the ball. Students are given other identities with names of months, days, and so on. For instance, twelve students represent names of the months in a year are standing in a circle. Teacher asks the students to bounce a ball to certain student that represent name of a month.

- f. Working with shapes. The teacher provides paper cut in variety shapes, colors and amounts. This technique is used for teaching color, shapes, ordinal and cardinal numbers. To teach each element, the teacher may ask students to pick the paper with specific color, number or shapes. Therefore, he can teach cardinal number by classifying the shapes, e.g. first group is triangles, second group is rectangles, third group is stars, and the fourth group is circulars and so on. He can go further with many more classifications.
- g. Following a procedure. In this kind of activity, the teacher provides material which describes the step by step for doing or making something, e.g. recipes and procedures to cook certain beverages, taking ablution water (*wudhu*), turning on and off certain devices or machines and so on. The common step by step techniques in the classroom is by introducing the related objects or parts of the devices followed by procedural demonstration.
- h. Information gaps. This kind of activity involves students, in pair or groups, to possess series of information, pictures and so on, which a part of them are missing. The missing parts are possessed by the partner or other groups. The activity involves students to ask for the missing by using imperatives.
- i. Role play and drama. This activity usually started by teacher's reading a certain text describing a situation. The students acts based on the activity described in the scenario²⁴.

Learning experiences involved in TPR are imitating actions, doing actions, listening and naming the actions. These experiences are implied within the procedure described as follows: Silver, et.al. describe the step by step for teaching by using TPR as follows:

- a. Teaching stage: teacher acts out some commands clearly and consistently, accompanied with saying the imperatives. At this stage, the students are expected to respond by doing the same action as the teacher does, without repeating what the teacher says. The teacher should use the words and actions of the imperatives consistently in order to build students' comprehension about the word-action system.

²⁴ Richard-Amato, Patricia A., Op cit., 2003, pp. 162-165

- b. Practice or rehearse stage. As students' comprehension has been acquired, the teacher needs to make students practice the actions orderly, in which he only says the words of the imperatives without doing the action. If students are still in state of confusion, the teacher can return back to stage 1.
- c. Evaluation stage. Teacher has the students act the imperatives randomly without doing the actions on his or her side. If it is needed, the teacher can act out the imperatives and the students are expected to say the words orderly, and then randomly. At this stage, the teacher will see whether the student have acquired the material that has been taught or practiced²⁵.

To be more comprehensively applied in the classrooms, the steps described below might be more helpful.

1. The teacher explains the types of the targeted language actions
 2. The teacher acts out the commands or action verbs, followed by the students
 3. The teacher mentions and writes new verbs and nouns on the whiteboard for the next command, and continue until all the commands are conducted
 4. The teacher gives the command and the students do the actions
 5. The teacher acts out the commands and the students name it
 6. The teachers ask the students to write down all the commands conducted
4. Material Development

Basically the materials are lists of commands or imperative sentences, which are literally perceived as combination of verbs and objects. The verbs are required to be actable and the objects are visualizable. Silver, et.al. point out that the physical actions and things made up the lessons are preferably involving real items—realia—to create meanings, however if the resources are not available they can be replaced by pictures which are suggested to be as huge and as clear as possible²⁶. Based on the techniques at the above section, material for TPR covers a huge variety of objects that must be attached with imperatives. Small objects, objects with parts, pictures, picture series, emoticons, shapes, rods, dolls are those which must be combined with imperatives; procedure for making or

²⁵ Silver et al., 2003., Opcit, p. 3

²⁶ Silver et al., 2003., Opcit, p. 2

doing something; information gaps to be filled by uttering command; and drama or role play material to perform.

From lower level until upper level, the objects can be extended based on sentential complexity by using phrases and clauses. For example:

- a. Low level:
 - Touch the door.
 - Open the door.
 - Close the door.
- b. High level:
 - Put your bag on the table.
 - Take these goods into the kitchen.
 - Take the rubbish into the bin at the front yard.
- c. Higher level:
 - Throw the ball to students who wears brown shirt.
 - Feed the cock which is kept in the cage.
 - Give this money to the poor widow who has many children.

Beyond the types of material mentioned above, many TPR practitioners attempt to create and apply many other types of material including those which introduce abstract concepts in the lessons, nonetheless with the acceptance of teachers' worldwide. Sensible and actable materials are undeniably the most accepted and practiced in the schools, and again, mostly for teaching children.

CONCLUSION

The Total Physical Response is a method in language teaching which promotes the learning of second and foreign language through physical activities on the basis of oral cues. The activities are performed as response to commands uttered by teacher and or classmates during the turn taking and procedural process of the class. Through that kind of listening-body movement connection, the students are expected to acquire comprehension about the language material. Therefore, the students will use the language in communication when they feel ready.

At the beginning level, the major material of this method is imperative sentences consist of observable verbs and objects. At a further level, the

imperatives can be added with phrases and clauses sequenced based on complexity. The grammatical gradation gives view on the syllabus as if it is a grammar based method. As a matter of fact, such organization appears due to the attempt to imitate the natural order of language acquisition, resulted from the observation about how children acquire their native language utterances.

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