USING TPR TO TEACH ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL

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USING TPR TO TEACH ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how TPR (known as Total Physical Response) can be used effectively to teach elementary school students who are learning English as a foreign language. TPR gained its reputation for its unique characteristic – having students physically respond to teachers' oral instructions. Supporters of TPR claim that it facilitates the process of second language acquisition because it enables students to *acquire* rather than *learn* a target language. However, opponents argue that TPR fails to teach more complex grammar features, which are not able to be demonstrated through actions. TPR can be effective in teaching English as a foreign language at the elementary school level because it allows teachers to provide comprehensible input and lower students' affective filter. Researchers also recommend that teachers use TPR in combination with other methods to overcome its limitations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

English is gaining increasing popularity over the world. It is now commonly taught as a foreign language at the elementary school level in many countries. English teachers as well as parents are aware of the importance of helping children learn English in an effective way. Elementary school students are characterized by a short-attention span and restless energy; most of them might favor an interesting learning environment. They are also in the process of developing their cognitive ability. It may be difficult to explain the English language to them due to their lack of metalinguistic knowledge.

TPR, which stands for Total Physical Response, is a language teaching method created by Asher and gained its popularity in the 1970s. TPR originated from the way that children acquire their first languages by listening to and physically responding to their interlocutors. Supporters of TPR claim that it facilitates the process of second language acquisition because it enables students to *acquire* rather than *learn* a target language. However, opponents argue that TPR fails to deal with more complex grammar features, which are not able to be demonstrated by performances.

This paper examines how TPR can be best applied to benefit elementary school students who are learning English as a foreign language. In Chapter 2, relevant first language acquisition and second language acquisition theories are reviewed to provide a theoretical framework for TPR, followed by a review of features, advantages, and limitations of TPR. In Chapter 3, recommendations are given to elementary school

teachers on how to effectively use TPR in teaching English as a foreign language.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is to identify how TPR can be effectively used to teach English as a foreign language at the elementary school level.

Definition of Terms

TPR, which stands for total physical response, is a successful language teaching method created by Asher and is based upon the way that children acquire their mother tongues by listening to and physically responding to their interlocutors.

First Language Acquisition is the process that children acquire their mother tongues.

Second Language Acquisition or **SLA**, is the process by which people learn a language in addition to their native tongue. The language to be learned is often referred to as the "target language" or "L2" (and SLA is often called "L2 acquisition").

EFL Abbreviation for the term English as a Foreign Language.

Delimitations of the Research

The research was conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over ninety (90) days. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite

and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics included “total physical response,” “first language acquisition,” “second language acquisition,” “EFL.”

Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on the studies of first language acquisition was conducted. A second review of literature focuses on the studies of second language acquisition. A third review of literature was conducted on the studies of TPR, including its features, advantages and limitations. The findings were summarized and recommendations on how to effectively use TPR were made.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter reviews relevant first language acquisition and second language acquisition theories to provide a theoretical framework for TPR. It also reviews studies on TPR, highlighting its features, advantages, and limitations.

First Language Acquisition

Many linguists and child psychologists have researched on the issue of how infants acquire their first language.

Infant Development

Even though infants are not able to talk initially, parents insist on talking to infants with gestures, such as pointing at a puppy and saying“Look at the puppy” simultaneously. Of course parents do not expect speech from their babies, who may only be able to produce babbling at this stage.

According to child psychologists Gesell and Thompson (1929), children observe their parents, trying to figure out how a language works; gradually, “[they] internalized a rather intricate map of how the language works” (as cited in Asher, 2003, p. 18), and then decode their parents’ utterances. All these steps contribute to the utterances of children when they are ready to talk. Infants may respond through movement, like eye movement from left to right, or facial expressions, or single words which may not be intelligible at all. Hence, “talk” (communication) at this stage is not unilateral; rather, it does exist between parents and children. Instead of

responding verbally, children follow direction and observe the behaviours of their parents when they are talking to them. Generally speaking, "throughout the child's development, production always shadows comprehension. Production lags far behind the child's understanding of spoken language" (Asher, 2003, p. 18).

The Behaviourism Perspective

According to behaviourism perspective, children acquire a language by imitating the target language produced around them. Proponents claim that "when children imitated the language produced by those around them, their attempts to reproduce what they heard received 'positive reinforcement'" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 10). Rowe and Levine (2009) believe that positive reinforcement and parents correcting children's ungrammatical utterances facilitate their language acquisition process. In this way, children acquire their first language through observation, imitation, and practice until they form the habits of using correct language.

Opponents argue that although imitation plays an important role in language acquisition, behaviourism fails to account for the forms that children use creatively in the process of imitation. Parrots are able to speak by imitation as well; however, they are unable to produce any utterance that they have not been taught. As Rowe and Levine (2009) point out, "imitation alone cannot account for the productivity of language generated by children in the five years after birth (p. 235)." For instance, children may say, *goed* instead of *went* when they knew they should use *–ed* to show the passive tense. Below is another example,

> David (5 years, 1 month) was at his older sister's birthday party, toasts were proposed with grape juice in stemmed glasses:

> Father: I'd like to propose a toast.
> Several minutes later, David raised his glass:
> David: I'd like to propose a piece of bread. (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 14)

It is obvious that David tried to creat new forms on the basis of the knowledge he has already retained. Rather than literal repetitions, children try to creat new forms of language in the process of imitation to indicate the knowledge they have obtained, and generalize them into new contexts (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

Connectionist Hypothesis

At the initial stage, even though children do not respond verbally, they respond spontaneously to parents' instructions. For instance, whenever parents utter the word "dog," a child may watch or look at his toy dog. Jeffrey Elman and his colleagues (1996) researched the language acquisition of children. They found that there were links or "connections" between words or phrases and the settings in which children acquire them. Those "connections" work as a "trigger for the retrieval of the associated word or phrase from memory" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

However, the process of acquiring words and phrases takes long time before the "the number of links (connections) between language and meaning built up" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 23-24). There is an interesting number of examples to show how children build up their comprehension of the target language gradually. Children first recoganize the word "cat," which could be a family pet as their parents tell them so; as they hear the word frequently in different contexts, they may assume that "cat" refers to those cats occur in books or on the TV as well. Lightbown and Spada (2006), along with opponents of behaviourism, claim that children have the

ability of trying to create new forms of language in the process of imitation, and apply them in new contexts. In this way, Children are able to handle more and more complex grammar when their "general ability to develop associations between things that occur together" is improved (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 24).

Second Language Acquisition

Among theories on second language acquisition, Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis and affective filter hypothesis are relevant to TPR and reviewed below. Cognitive development emphasizing the impact of children's cognitive ability on their second language acquisition and connectionist perspective stressing connections between words and settings are also included in this section.

Krashen's Hypothesis

Krashen proposes five hypotheses based on his model in the early 1970s. He makes a distinction between acquisition and learning; Krashen argues that learners unconsciously acquire a language through extensive exposure to the language, while they learn a language through conscious effort (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). He also suggests that it is unnecessary to explicitly explain grammatical rules, or to emphasize tedious drill in teaching a second language (Schütz, 2007). Instead, he recommends children should be immersed in a second language environment in which they can acquire the second language in the same way that they acquire their first language.

Input hypothesis. Krashen proposes the input hypothesis with the purpose of explaining how language acqusition occurs. As noted above, Krashen advocates

unconscious second language acquisition, rather than formal language instruction. Thus, the input hypothesis focuses primarily on acquisition, not learning (Schütz, 2007). Krashen designs his *i+1* model. *i* represents learners' current linguistic competence, while *1* indicates the stage just one step beyond the learners' linguistic competence (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Krashen emphasizes the "comprehensibility of input that includes language structures that are just beyond the learner's current development level" (Lightbown & Spada 2006, p. 47). In other words, "if the teacher uses language that is just in advance of students' current level of proficiency, while making sure that her input is comprehensible, acquisition will proceed 'naturally'" (Freeman, 2006, p. 107).

Affective filter hypothesis. However, extensive exposure to comprehensible input cannot guarantee successful language acquisition. Krashen proposes the affective filter hypothesis to account for the impact of the affective filter on second language acquisition. As Lightbown and Spada (2006) suggest, "the 'affective filter' is a metaphorical barrier that prevents learners from acquiring language even when appropriate input is available" (p. 37). Generally speaking, "affect" could refer to positive feelings like high motivation, confidence, positive emotion and the like or negative feelings like boredom, nervousness, tenseness, and anxiety. The second language acquisition would not occur or may prevent learners from speaking. Krashen believes that negative feelings will "'raise' the affective filter and form a 'mental block' that prevents comprehension input from being used for acquisition," whereas positive feelings "are better equipped for success in second language acquisition" (as

cited in Schütz, 2007).

Cognitive Development

As noted above, children in the process of acquiring their first language will not be able to produce utterances before they store enough repertoire of language items and figure out how the language works. Their comprehension and retention of the target language grows with the development of their cognitive ability. In other words, children's ability to learn a second language is associated with their cognitive development. According to Lightbown and Spada's research (2006) on children's language acquisition, there is a "developmental sequence" or "order of acquisition" in the process of children acquiring their first language. For example, children do not use past tense before they have developed some understanding of what the past tense means. Generally speaking, "the developmental sequences seem to reflect the gradual mastery of the linguistic elements for expressing ideas that have been present in children's cognitive understanding for a long time" (Lightbown and Spada, 2006, p. 2).

Some researchers have revealed that second language learners experience similar developmental sequence stages as well. Lightbown and Spada (2004) find it is remarkable that developmental sequence is similar even among different second language learners with different learning backgrounds and different first languages. Unlike infants whose cognitive problems are the understanding of events or objects around them, second language learners primarily develop their metalinguistic awareness including their understanding of grammatical morphemes, syntax problems,

tenses and the like. For instance, the negation in English in different forms (*no, don't*, or *not*) often confuse second language learners before they figure out their differences. On the other hand, their first language may interfere with their acquisition of English negation. Even though learners are aware of the differences among different forms of negation, they may still apply them mistakenly in spontaneous conversations.

Connectionist Hyphothesis

As noted in the section of first language acquisition, "connections" existing between words and the settings in which children acquire them work as a "trigger for the retrieval of the associated word or phrase from memory" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 23). These "connections" work for the second language acquisition as well. According to Lightbown and Spada (2006),

> Connectionists argue that learners gradually build up their knowledge of language through exposure to the thousand of instances of the linguistic features they eventually hear. After hearing language features in specific situational or linguistic contexts over and over again, learners develop a stronger and strong network of "connections" between these elements. Eventually, the presence of one situational or linguistic element will activate the other(s) in the learner's mind. (p. 41)

It is obvious that being more exposed to the target language, learners are likely to associate the linguistic elements with situations in the process of acquiring the target language.

Proponents of connectionist hypothesis believe that environment plays an important role in language acquisition and acknowledge the value of the distinction between acquisition and learning proposed by Krashen. For instance, learners may acquire the third person singular form because of exposure to language items such as *"He plays" and "She walks*" rather than simply memorizing the rule. As suggested by

Ellis (2003, 2005) and others, “language is at least partly learned in chunks larger than single words” (as cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2006, p. 41).

Total Physical Response

TPR, which stands for Total Physical Response, is a language teaching method created by Asher and gained its popularity in the 1970s. TPR originated from the way that children acquire their first languages by listening to and physically responding to their interlocutors. According to Asher & Price, “TPR works as an excellent way of providing students with comprehensible input; the teacher's movement provides the background knowledge that makes the command more comprehensible” (Asher & Price, 1967).

Why It Works

With regard to the process of infants acquiring their first language, obviously they do not acquire the language as a result of their parents explaining the language to them. However, it is remarkable that they are able to respond to “directions uttered in the target language” (Asher 2003, p. 19).

As noted in the section about first language acquisition, children experience several stages (careful observation, response with a gesture, barely intelligible utterance, and then intelligible uttrance) before they “internalize an intricate map of how the language works” (Asher 2003, p. 18). Like infants, it is hard to explain and translate English to elementary school students who have limited language proficiency in the target language and cognitive ability. Nor can they easily utter the

target language. According to Asher (2003), the "'biological' pattern for acquiring language does not disappear" (p. 18). Hence, the best way of learning another language is to follow the process of first language acquisition process. In other words, learners should have extensive exposure to the target language before they are ready to produce utterances. Then how does TPR works for elementary school students who are learning English as a foreign language?

Language-physical communication. In the process of first language acquisition, comprehension (listening) comes before utterance (speaking). Asher (2003) claims that "as listening comprehension develops, there is a point of readiness to speak in which the child spontaneously begins to produce utterances with a minimum of stress" (p. 4). The basic principle of TPR is to have students physically respond to oral instructions. For instance, if a teacher goes to a door and meanwhile says "*go to the door,"* students are likely to figure out the meaning of "*go to the door*," even though they may be unable to repeat or say the phrase yet.

Asher (2003) argues that the method of TPR can be used most effectively to teach imperative sentences in that they can largely be demonstrated by TPR. At the initial stage of learning another language, students are unable to produce the target language; TPR can be used to help students comprehend utterances. On the other hand, TPR can allow teachers to assess students' comprehension of the target language. For example, a teacher can tell whether an utterance is comprehensible for students by having them physically respond to his direction. Asher (1988) believes that instead of literal translation between the mother tongue and the second language, "gradually

pronunciation and grammar will shape itself [comprehensible] in the direction of the native speaker" (p. 19), in which students are able to *acquire* a second language rather than *learn* it. He also stated that TPR is valuable for helping students internalizing any new vocabulary item or structure.

Some researchers question whether TPR can work effectively with other grammar structures. However, Asher (2003) argues that through effective and skillful applications, TPR can cover most of the grammatical structures of the target language and thousands of vocabulary items, for example, *go to the door* and *close the window*. Teachers can reshuffle the two expressions to produce new commands, like *go to the window* and *close the door*. Asher (2003) explained that "the linguistic flexibility in understanding recombinations may be the skill often referred to as 'fluency'" (p. 6). In other words, if students are able to comprehend the recombination of words, they are acquiring the target language.

Low stress environment. Krashen's hypothesis—the affective filter hypothesis accounts for how TPR works in the classroom to raise students' interests and reduce their anxiety as well. As it has been discussed before, a *low affective filter* enhances second language acquisition. Larsen-Freeman (2006) suggests that "creating a 'low affective filter' is also a condition for learning that is met when there is a good classroom atmosphere" (p. 107). Therefore, TPR can be utilized to make learning interesting and enjoyable. Through games and physical movements, a teacher may arouse the interests of the majority of students and involve them in the activities. On the other hands, TPR creates a relaxing learning atmosphere, which helps to reduce

students' anxiety in learning a second language. TPR can also be employed to build students' motivation and confidence. According to Freeman (2006), "If anxiety is reduced, the students' self-confidence is boosted" (p. 107).

Right brain vs. left brain. According to Asher (2003), "the brain and nervous systerm are biologically programmed to acquire language, either the first or second, in a particular sequence and in a particular mode" (p. 4). Asher concludes in his experiement that the right brain is able to control actions in response to commands in the target language, whereas the left brain controls the way people speak. Just like infants acquiring their first language, even though their left brains are not mature enough to enable them to express themselves orally, they can still gradually decode and react to the language of their parents if they "observe language 'causing' different actions" (p. 24). In other words, "the left is verbal while the right is non-verbal which means that it can communicate through physical behaviour such as pointing, touching and drawing"(p. 24).

Elementary school students can imitate the way of infants learning their mother tongues in the process of second language acquisition. Asher (2003) believes "at the optimal starting point in acquiring another language is to enter the strange language through the right hemisphere" (p. 25). Harris Winit conducted a study on the function of the right hemisphere in second language acquisition, in which students react to directions in the target language by listening to tapes and looking at the pictures in their books. He concluded that even without translation, students are able to internalize "a more and more sophisticated understanding of the target language" (as

cited in Asher, 2003, p. 25). In contrast, left brain learning is “slow-motion learning,” “practiced before the student has internalizd a holistic pattern of how the language works” (Asher, 2003, p. 25). For example, instead of demonstrating, teachers explain grammar rules to students before they are aware of what the grammar is. These practices finally turn out to be tedious drillings and retention of the target language, slow down the pace of learning, and raise students’ affective filter.

With the use of physical movements and games, TPR is a typical right-brain method. Students listen to a teacher’s directions, while watching him or her act out the directions. Gradually, they are able to comprehend the teacher’s directions.

Limitations

Complex grammar. TPR works well for the inperative commands that carry the meanings. However, people doubt to what extent a language can be taught through TPR. Asher, the creater of TPR claims that imperatives can be applied to put comprehensible approach into practice as long as they are being best used (Freeman, 2006). He explains that “As the Ss learn more and more of the target language, a longer series of connected commands can be given, which together comprise a whole procedure” (as cited in Freeman, 2006, p. 116). For example,

Teacher: Mike, go to the table.

Teacher: If Mike went to the table, please raise your right hand.

Teacher: If Mike did not go to the table, please raise your left hand.

The example above shows that the teacher use complex grammar features, which to a certain extent proves Asher’s point that “activities can be broken down into an

action sequence that students can be asked to perform" (as cited in Freeman, 2003, p. 117). However, TPR cannot thoroughly address more complex grammar features that students need for their progress.

At the initial stage, meanings can be communicated through easy commands as well as physical movements. But it is hard to merely use body movements to explain more sophisticated grammar features, such as tenses and abstract nouns. Besides, TPR requires students to observe carefully, listen to a teacher's instructions, and finally produce the target language when they are ready to under a low stress. In other words, it is a long process for students to internalize how the target language works. .

Students' personalities. There are concerns regarding whether TPR works with all elementary school students. As a matter fact, teachers need to take the personalities of elementary school students into consideration when creating a syllabus and choosing teaching methods. Elementary school students are characterized by a short-attention span and restless energy; most of them might favor an interesting learning environment. In other words, elementary school students would like to learn in a cooperative way. As Asher (2003) mentions, "there is an intimate relationship between language and the child's body" (p. 3). TPR which caters to children's learning needs might to be effective in helping them learn a second language. However, students' diverse personalities need to be considered because not all students may be as cooperative as expected. For instance, there are extrovert students who are eager to answer all the questions from teachers, but lose their interests easily; there are students who are rather shy, easily getting anxious or nervous whenever they

make mistakes.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As noted above, teaching a second language with TPR has pros and cons. It works well with imperative instructions and vocabulary, but it may not function well with more complex grammar, except for those grammar rules that can be demonstrated by actions. According to Diaz (2005), with enough exposure, "the grammar and syntax of any language will be internalized by the students through synthesis, not analysis." Generally speaking, it can be effectively use to teach a second language to elementary school students who are at the initial stage of learning the language. However, TPR has its limitations. Therefore, teachers should try to apply TPR skillfully in combination with other methods and techniques in order to maximize the advantages of TPR. Below are some recommendations on how to put TPR to its best use:

The Importance of Novelty

Students cannot learn a second language by simply memorizing its grammar rules. According to Krashen's learning-acquisition perspective (2003), language acquisition should not be reduced to memorizing fixed expressions. Instead, language acquisition should occur spontaneously with the aid of actions, because "memory is activated through learner response" and "the target language should be presented in chucks, not just word by word" (Freeman, 2006. p. 111). In other words, language acquisition should address the right hemisphere, which controls nonverbal behavior.

Asher (2003) recommends teachers to introduce novelty into their commands, such as changing the sequence of their commands. The benefits of using novelty fall into three categories as follows:

> The intent is first to encourage flexbility in understanding the target language in the richness of recombinations. Secondly, novelty is a keen motivator. The surprises will delight both you and the students. And thirdly, students self-confidence is enhanced because they are aware that they instantlly understood an unfamiliar uttrance-one they had never heard before in training. (Asher, 2003, p. 5)

With teachers' using novelty techniques, students are able to connect actions with the target language as a result of gaining "flexibility in understanding novel combinations of target language chucks" (Freeman, 2006. p. 112) as well as improving their listening comprehension.

A Role Reversal

Teachers should not be the only director of the whole class; instead, they should give students opportunities to be the director. Asher points out that when students are ready to utter as a result of enough exposure to the target language, a role reversal between the students and the teacher could occur (Freeman, 2006). In other words, a teacher should consider a role reversal between him and students when his instructions become comprehensible to a proportion of students. Freeman (2006) suggests teachers go after the procedure as follows, teachers modeling, students acting in response, teachers recombining grammar features, and finally students' producing utterances. In other words, teachers initiate commands and perform actions which convey meanings; students internalize the meanings and act in response to commands to show their comprehension. Then teachers vary the sequence of grammar features in

order to improve students' flexibility in comprehension.

The roles of a teacher and students are different. At the initial stage, the teacher is a director, giving commands to students while students perform actions in response to the teacher's commands, demonstrating their understanding. But the roles that the teacher and the students assume should not be fixed. Through a role switch, students can show their understanding of the taught material. Freeman also believes that "observers must demonstrate their understanding of the commands in order to retain them" (Freman, 2006. p. 114). For example, after several times of demonstrating the target instructions, the teacher can have individual students who have already acquired the instructions model the target commands (as teachers do previously) to the rest of the students. In this way, most of the students are able to practice orally while others have more opportunities to practice the commands. And this process can be applied in turn till most of the students are able to utter the commands.

Low stress Atmosphere

Infants cannot be forced to talk before they are ready; nor can their acquisition of their first language be speeded up. They can only utter something after their store enough language items with enough exposure to a language. According to Asher (2003), "readiness to talk is an interesting concept because it contradicts the notion that one person can *directly* teach someone else to talk" (p. 18). In other words, it is essential for teachers to minimize the stress arising from learning a second language.

In the second language classroom, children even those who have extrovert personality may feel stressed or anxious to respond to teachers' commands in a target

language. Those anxieties relate to high affective filters, such as low proficiency in the target language and being afraid of making errors. However, positive emotions such as confidence, motivation, and interest enhance second language acquisition. Hence, Freeman (2006) proposes that second language learning should be enjoyable to be more effective.

Basically, TPR aims to build up a low stress learning atmosphere. However, teachers still need to consider how to minimize stress among students. Teachers should not attempt to force students to produce utterances; instead, they should wait with patience for students' spontaneous utterances.

Error Correction

How a teacher responds to students' errors is another factor affecting learning atmosphere. Teachers cannot expect students (at least all of them) produce perfect utterances at an earlier stage. Rather, "If students are corrected on every last sentence they utter, they will put up an affective filter, which switches language acquisition to language learning. Not only that, but students tend to get frustrated when over-corrected" (Sabine & German, 2001).

Freeman (2006) recommends that teachers should be patient and only correct major errors and that as students improve further, teachers can "fine tune"—correct more minor errors. Excessive or constant corrections may have negative impact on students' self-confidence and in turn, on the pace of acquiring a second language.

Of course, TPR is by no means a panacea. Krashen (1998) mentions that TPR cannot do the entire job of language teaching, nor was it designed to be a panacea. But

TPR can definitely be used to facilitate teaching English as a foreign language at the elementary school level if it is used to teach grammar points or words that can be demonstrated by physical movements or if it is used in combination with other methods.

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