**Lecture 6**

**Total-physical response method**

1. Principles of TPR
2. TPR Procedure
3. TPR activities for teaching English to young learners

Background of TPR

Total Physial Response (TPR) is a method of teaching a foreign or second language (target language) by developing listening comprehension through a series of commands to which students respond with physical activity. It was founded by James Asher, a professor of psychology, in the late 1960’s and is still considered and used as a valuable linguistic tool in teaching a target language, especially in initial stages of instruction. It combines language and gesture, thus making language acquisition more natural and memorable (Asher 2007; Curtain and Dahlberg 2010; Larsen-Freeman 2004; Morley 2001). Learners are not expected to speak while performing actions, which makes TPR stress-free and suitable for teaching beginners, either young learners, teenagers or adults (Asher 2007).

When teaching young learners, TPR can be very beneficial as it responds favourably to their tendency to learn best by doing; it also respects children’s need to develop listening comprehension before speaking and to take as much time as necessary before they feel ready to speak. As Peck (2001, 143) notices it, children seem to learn language quickly and thoroughly when the brain and body work together“. The physical aspect of TPR learning process makes it possible to integrate physical exercise and play into language teaching quite naturally and to enhance children’s physical activity and engagement outside Physical Education classes, contributing not only to their linguistic, but also to their physical development. The paper will describe the basic characteristics of the method and its possible application in a young learner classroom.

**2. PRINCIPLES OF TPR**

The basic principles guiding TPR method are drawn from developmental psychology, theory of learning, brain research, and humanistic pedagogy (Richards and Rodgers 2006, 73). Asher believes that learning a target language should be similar to native language acquisition: in learning a native language, comprehension comes before speaking and a child first responds to commands physically, and only later verbally; as affective factors are very important in learning, teachers should create a comfortable learning atmosphere to lower the affective filter and to help learning; gestures should be combined with listening comprehension to increase long-term retention; since brain processes information faster and accepts it as reliable if listening is followed by movement (right brain learning), without speaking or translation (left brain learning), learners should be silent not to cause ’brain overload’: by silently responding to commands, learners internalise the new language (phonology, vocabulary, grammar and semantics) simultaneously, without any analysis, and speaking, reading and writing should follow later, after a solid foundation has been created by TPR (Asher 2007).

Asher draws the above principles on three very influential learning hypotheses: 1. There is an innate language learning bio-programme which involves the following steps and processes: children develop listening comprehension before they start to speak; children’s listening comprehension is acquired by responding physically to parents’ commands; solid listening comprehension enables speech to develop naturally, with no effort; 2. TPR is directed to right brain learning (unlike most language teaching methods), and right brain activities make it possible for the left brain hemisphere to process language for speaking, reading and writing; 3. first language acquisition happens in and is fostered by stress-free environment, which means that similar conditions should be created in target language learning: TPR reduces anxiety by sequencing the introduction of skills and by focusing on meaning (by combining listening comprehension and physical response) instead of on language form and grammatical structures (Richards and Rodgers 2006, 74–75).

**3. TPR PROCEDURE**

Language lessons based on TPR involve a series of teacher’s commands introduced gradually and repeated until internalised by the class. The teacher first gives a command and performs the corresponding action with four volunteers in front of the class (command: *Stand up*.), while the class just listens and watches them perform. New commands are added one by one to a set of already internalised commands (*Stand up. Sit down.* *Turn around. Jump. Stop. Walk*.), with the teacher modelling the corresponding activities together with the volunteers, and frequently changing the sequence of commands (Larsen-Freeman 2004, 109).

In the next stage, the teacher gives already introduced and practised commands without performing the actions, and the volunteers respond, demonstrating their understanding of the language introduced and practised. After checking understanding with volunteers, the teacher gives the first command (*Stand up*.) to the class, and after all students show their comprehension, the teacher continues with other commands that the class has observed being performed by the teacher and the volunteers (*Sit down. Stand* *up. Jump. Stop. Sit down. Stand up. Turn around. Turn around. Jump. Sit down.).*

It is important that the commands are introduced at the right pace (three at a time, as Larsen-Freeman suggests (ibid. 116)), so that all students can feel successful.

Once the class can perform all the commands without hesitation, the teacher introduces new language through new commands that are more complex and contain not only new verbs, but also nouns, adjectives and adverbs: *Point to the door/the chair/the desk*. *Walk to the door/the window/the chair. Touch the chair/the door/the desk*. etc. In this way, not only content words can be introduced and practised, but grammar words, as well (articles, prepositions, pronouns, etc.). The sequence of commands should be varied until all the students are able to follow the commands with no hesitation. Also, it is very important to introduce the commands that are new to the students (e.g. *Jump to the desk.* *Sit on the desk.),* and to give compound commands that require two or more actions (e.g. *Point to the door and walk to the door*.): this helps students to develop flexibility in understanding unknown utterances and keeps them motivated and attentive.

Moreover, the teacher can give a series of connected commands and create an action sequence related to everyday activities, like giving instructions about writing a letter: *Take out a pen. Take out a piece of paper. Write a letter. (*imaginary*) Fold the* *letter. Put it in an envelope. Write the address on the envelope. Put a stamp on the envelope.* *Mail the letter.* (ibid. 117). By responding to compound commands correctly, with no hesitation, the students demonstrate that they have internalised the new language.

In the first few weeks of introducing and practising English through TPR, students are not expected to speak, but only to observe and respond nonverbally. However, when some students feel confident enough to give commands, they take over one by one, and the class and the teacher respond with actions. Speaking is thus introduced at students’ individual pace, as an anxiety-free activity. The errors that appear when the students give commands are part of the learning process and they should not be corrected until the students become more proficient (ibid. 113). Evaluation can be easily performed by giving commands to individual students or by having them create and perform skits in pairs or groups (ibid. 115). The focus should be on vocabulary and grammatical structures that are embedded in imperatives as meaning, rather than form. Grammar is, therefore, learned inductively, which makes TPR particularly suitable for teaching English to young learners. Moreover, TPR has the potential to create fun and enjoyment (e.g. through humorous commands and skits), which further makes language learning more effective when teaching children.

4. **TPR activities for teaching English to young learners**

TPR activities, especially action games, can be used to introduce new language in a very effective way. The teacher interacts with children in the following sequence: giving commands, modelling the desired behaviour, removing the model after a few repetitions (when children respond confidently), combining commands in unexpected and creative ways, or turning them into stories and competitive games. Curtain and Dahlberg (2010, 63–64) describe the procedure as specific steps to be followed by the teacher, and give the following examples:

• *Raise your hand. Put your hand on your foot. Turn around. Put your hand on the*

*floor.*

• *Put your hand on your elbow. Raise your knee. Turn around. Jump backwards*

*three times.*

• *Put your elbow on your knee and turn around.*

• *Raise your hand. Walk backwards to the map, put your left hand on your head*

*and put your right elbow on South America.*

• *Angie, hold the (stuffed animal) monkey with your right hand. Mario, put your*

*right elbow on the monkey’s head. Kim, put your elbow on the monkey’s nose.*

*Class, take out your (imaginary) cameras and take a picture of the monkey and*

*his friends. Smile!*

Useful vocabulary for beginning TPR should involve action verbs like *stand up, sit down, lift/raise, lower, point to, lay/place, take, pick up, jump, skip, walk, turn around, clap, open, shut, hold, drink, eat, wave*, then adjectives and adverbs such as *fast, slow, (three) times, (to the) left/right/front/back, high, low, backwards, forwards, sedeways, above/over, below/under, in, on, next to*, and nouns denoting body parts, classroom objects,parts of the room, colours and numbers.

**4.1 Commands**

The most usual TPR activities involve teacher’s commands to which students respond physically, demonstrating comprehension. Some commands require using largemotor skills, while others involve interaction with classroom objects, like desks, chairs, maps, the whiteboard, board markers, or pictures and charts. Here are

some example TPR activities based on commands.

1. Depending on the topic of the lesson, the teacher can prepare commands that will strengthen vocabulary learning using hand movement to manipulate any set

of pictures or flashcards: *Point to / Touch / Pick up (an apple / a pear / an orange*

*/ a strawberry).* The activity can become more physically demanding if carried out as a competitive game in which the speed of running and the ability to understand commands are combined: the pictures or flashcards can be stuck on the whiteboard and individual members of two groups of children run to the whiteboard to touch or pick up the picture with the word the teacher uses in his/her command; the group that collects more flashcards is the winner. This activity can be done as a lead-in for introducing new vocabulary, or as a practice activity for reviewing vocabulary.

2. A more demanding activity will be the one requiring children to act out the verbs appearing in a story. A good example is the story *Susan Laughs* by Jeanne Willis (2000). There are 14 action verbs in the story in two categories: sports and hobbies - *dance, paint, ride, row, sing, swim, trot,* and activities done in the park - *fly, hide, spin, splash, swing, throw, wave.* Children can mime the verbs, either while listening to the story or responding to teacher’s commands.

Hearing impaired children can be scaffolded with flashcards showing the pictures of activities, while physically impaired children can respond by holding up a flashcard showing the action that corresponds to the teacher’s command.

Further, the verbs can be practiced by playing the game *Susan says* (similar to the well known action game *Simon says*): *Susan says laugh! Susan says* *swim! Susan says wave! Susan says laugh!* Children are supposed to perform only the activities introduced with *Susan says.* If children mime the action when the teacher says *Laugh! w*ithout saying *Susan says*, they are out (Ellis 2008, 3–4). The commands can be made more challenging if given with increasingly faster speed. These activities can be used as practice or wrap-up activities, or at any time during the lesson if a change of pace is needed.

3. For lessons ouside the classroom, more action can be introduced with commands like: *Run forward. Take three teps to the left. Jump up and down*. *Throw*

*the ball.* The sequence of commands should be prepared in advance so that they

are given fast, for the amusement of children.

**4.2 TPR Storytelling**

TPR storytelling is another method that uses pantomime and physical activity: each word in a story has its own gesture, which can be drawn from Sign Language for hearing impaired students (Peck 2001, 146). After children have learned the vocabulary appearing in the story by responding to it with gestures or pantomime, the teacher tells this mini-story and the students act it out: *Tammy has a cat in the chair. The cat runs away.* *Tammy looks everywhere for the cat. She comes back and sits down. Oh! The cat is* *asleep in the chair*.

**4.3 Miming and role-playing**

This group of activities/games are usually related to a traditional song and focus on bringing language of the songs to life with simulation. Using simulation and dramatization children act out the traditional songs, like *The Mulberry Bush*. When listening to the song, children join hands and run round a ring, and then stand still to mime washing their hands, cleaning their teeth, brushing their hair, cleaning their shoes, or going to school (Lee 1986, 151–152). Another well-known action song is *Head, shoulders, knees* *and toes*, in which children touch respective body parts, thus performing physical exercise that requires them to bend forward and croach down. What is more, movement and actions are often naturally embedded in stories for children. Actions can be introduced and practised before storytelling, and after that done during the storytelling (Shin 2014, 221). In this way, storytelling is more active and enjoyable, and actions meaningful and contextualised. Shin (ibid.) gives an example of performing physical actions of the story *Five Little Monkeys (Jumping on the Bed*) by both the teacher and the children during storytelling: changing into their pijamas, brushing their teeth, jumping, falling, calling and sleeping. These activities can make the story memorable.

**References:**

Richards, Jack C. and Theodore S. Rodgers (1986). *Approaches and methods in language teaching: A description and analysis.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Brown, H. D. (2000). Principles of language learning and teaching (4th ed.). New York: Longman