

Teaching Children Using a Total Physical Response (TPR) Method: *Rethinking*

Handoyo Puji Widodo

Abstract: Teaching English, especially for children, should be enjoyable, interesting, repetitive, and understandable. In doing so, there should be appropriate methods for teaching English to them. One of the alternative methods that can be applied in the classroom is the so-called Total Physical Response. This method tries to introduce some language skills or components in an action in which a teacher serves three roles: an order taker, a model provider, and an action monitor in which learners serve as models and action performers until they feel ready to speak out.

Key words: young learners, total physical response (TPR), alternative method.

Up to now, teaching English, particularly at elementary schools in Indonesia has totally been encouraged. This attempt is geared to familiarize pupils with English at an early stage. Almost all elementary schools located in urban areas in particular conduct English teaching. It has been 11 years that English teaching is run since the Decree of Minister of Education and Culture Number 060/U/1993 regarding English as a local content subject matter starting from the fourth grade was issued (Suyanto, 2004).

As English teaching achieves its prominence at elementary schools, English is taught commencing from the first grade. For this reason, English teachers who are concerned with teaching children should be aware of the nature of their psychology in addition to mastering all crucial components in teaching them.

So far, English teachers have been experiencing difficulty in teaching children since they are less sufficient especially in implementing appropriate

Handoyo Puji Widodo adalah dosen Bahasa Inggris Politeknik Negeri Jember

teaching materials and methods. Thus, the selection of the two elements should be on the basis of learners' age.

To successfully conduct English teaching at elementary schools, teaching materials and methods are well suited. For this reason, one method considered one of the efforts to English teaching for children, should be introduced. This method is known as Total Physical Response (TPR). Prior to discussing such a method in detail, this paper starts with describing characteristics of children.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN

In learning language, children begin learning simple expressions. Broadly speaking, children learn abstract rules of language from which they listen, and even they also learn expressions that they have never heard before.

It is extremely important that teachers not only get children to learn language, but they also encourage them to learn it positively.

Teaching of English for Children has been of particular concerns. For this reason, in teaching children English, there are some characteristics of whom presented by Scott and Lisbeth (1992).

- Children aged 8-10 are mature enough;
- They have a particular point of view;
- They are able to describe the difference between facts and fictions;
- They are curious of asking questions;
- They believe in what is said and the 'real' world to express and comprehend meaning/message;
- They have distinct opinions about what they like and what they dislike;
- They are open to what happens in the classroom and begin asking a teacher's decision; and
- They can cooperate with each other and learn from others.

In addition, Scott and Lisbeth (1992) say that children particularly aged 8–10 are competent mother tongue users. In this regard, they are aware of basic linguistic rules of their mother tongue. At these ages, children can grasp abstracts and symbols, generalize language, and systematize it. Children are also capable of interpreting meaning without understanding

words separately, are competent in using language creatively, are frequently fond of doing 'exploration' and making a certain condition enjoyable; have established imagination; and are fond of communicating (Halliwell, 1992).

In the context of teaching, most people assume that children learn a foreign language in the same way that they learn their mother tongue. Basically, children are potential in acquiring and learning a foreign language, and even they learn it more quickly than those who are learning the foreign language after puberty (McLaughlin, 1978). On the contrary, children are less capable of absorbing or acquiring a foreign language optimally (Long, 1990).

WHAT IS TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE (TPR)

TPR is one of the English teaching approaches and methods developed by Dr. James J Asher. It has been applied for almost thirty years. This method attempts to center attention to encouraging learners to listen and respond to the spoken target language commands of their teachers. In other words, TPR is a language teaching method built around the coordination of speech and action; it attempts to teach language through physical (motor) activity.

Asher's Total Physical Response is a "natural method" since Asher views first and second language learning as parallel processes. He argues that second language teaching and learning should reflect the naturalistic processes of first language learning. For this reason, there are such three central processes:

- (a) before children develop the ability to speak, they develop listening competence. At the early phases of first language acquisition, they are able to comprehend complex utterances, which they hardly can spontaneously produce or imitate. Asher takes into accounts that a learner may be making a mental 'blueprint' of the language that will make it possible to produce spoken language later during this period of listening;
- (b) children's ability in listening comprehension is acquired because children need to respond physically to spoken language in the form of parental commands; and
- (c) when a foundation in listening comprehension has been established, speech evolves naturally and effortlessly out of it.

Asher believes that it is crucial to base foreign language learning upon how children learn their native language. In other words, TPR is designed based upon the way that children learn their mother tongue. In this respect, TPR considers that one learns best when he is actively involved and grasp what he hears (Haynes, 2004; Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Linse, 2005).

CHARACTERISTICS OF TPR

Imperative drills are the prominent classroom activity in TPR. They are typically geared to highlight physical actions and activity on the part of the learners. In this sense, learners play main roles: a listener and a performer. They listen attentively and respond physically to commands by the teacher. Learners need to respond both individually and collectively; they have minor influence on the content of learning inasmuch as content is determined by the teacher. At the beginning of learning, learners are also expected to recognize and respond to novel combinations of previously taught items. Such novel utterances are recombinations of constituents the teacher has used directly in training. For example, the teacher directs learners with 'Walk to the table!' and 'Sit on the chair!' These are familiar to learners since they have practiced responding to them. Furthermore, learners are also to produce novel combinations of their own. Learners monitor and evaluate their own progress. They are encouraged to speak when they feel ready to speak (e.g. when a sufficient basis in the language has been internalized).

In TPR, a teacher plays an active and direct role: the director of a stage play in which the learners are the actors". It is the teacher who decides what to teach, who models and presents the new materials, and who selects supporting materials for classroom use. Therefore, the teacher ought to be well prepared and well organized so that the lesson flows smoothly and predictably. It is highly recommended to write down the exact utterances the teacher will be using, especially the novel commands because the action is so fast-moving; there is usually no time for you to create spontaneously". In this regard, classroom interaction and turn taking is teacher rather than learner directed. Pay attention to the example:

Teacher: Maria, pick up the box of rice and hand it to Miguel and ask Miguel to read the price.

In giving feedback to learners, the teacher is required to follow the example of parents giving feedback to their children. Similarly, the teacher needs to tolerate fewer mistakes in speech; he has to avoid too much correction in the early stages and is not required to interrupt to correct errors in that this may inhibit learners to take an action or speak out.

To sum up, in TPR, the teachers are responsible for giving commands and monitoring actions taken by the learners. On the contrary, the learners are imitators of teacher's verbal and non-verbal models. In teaching-learning process, the first phase is modeling. In this case, a teacher issues commands to learners, and performs the actions with them. In the second phase, learners demonstrate that they grasp the commands by performing them alone; the teacher monitors the learners' actions. Above all, the interaction between a teacher and learners is signified by the teacher speaking and the learners responding nonverbally. Later on, the learners become more verbal and the teacher responds nonverbally (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Rodgers, 2003).

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF TPR

TPR has some advantages and disadvantages. Its advantages include:

- 1) It is a lot of fun. Learners enjoy it, and this method can be a real stirrer in the class. It lifts the pace and the mood;
- 2) It is very memorable. It does assist students to recognize phrases or words;
- 3) It is good for kinaesthetic learners who are required to be active in the class;
- 4) It can be used both in large or small classes. In this case, it is no matter to have how many students you have as long as you are prepared to take the lead, the learners will follow;
- 5) It works well with mixed-ability classes. The physical actions get across the meaning effectively so that all the learners are able to comprehend and apply the target language;
- 6) It is no need to have a lot of preparation or materials using the TPR. In this regard, as long as you are competent of what you want to practise (a rehearsal beforehand can help), it will not take a lot of time to get ready;
- 7) It is very effective with teenagers and young learners; and
- 8) It involves both left and right-brained learning;

In addition to such advantages, TPR has disadvantages. Among them are:

- Students who are not used to such things might find it embarrassing. This can be the case initially that if the teacher is prepared to perform the actions, the students feel happier about copying. In addition, the students are in a group and do not have to perform for the whole class. This pleasure is reserved for the teacher;
- It is only really suitable for beginner levels. Whilst, it is clear that it is far more useful at lower levels because the target language lends itself to such activities even though it can successfully be applied at Intermediate and Advanced levels. In this respect, it is essential to adapt the language, accordingly. For example, when teaching 'ways of walking' (stumble, stagger, and tiptoe) to an advanced class and cooking verbs to intermediate students (whisk, stir, and grate), TPR can be employed;
- It is not flexibly used to teach everything, and if used a lot, it would become repetitive. This method is a fun way of changing the dynamics and pace of a lesson used in conjunction with other methods and techniques. To sum up, TPR should best be combined with others since it needs much energy so that learners do not feel tired of learning language; and
- Although the use of TPR in the classroom has often been effective, it does have its flaws. One of this method flaws is that when a teacher uses TPR in their lesson, they will have trouble teaching abstract vocabulary or expressions. As a remedy, the teacher can write the word on cards with a picture if applicable. Another flaw is that TPR can be ineffective if the teacher uses it for a long period of time without switching it with other activities that help teach the target language. Since TPR is made up of mainly of commands, it tends to neglect narrative, descriptions, and conversation forms of language.

THE APPLICATION OF TPR IN THE CLASSROOM

TPR can be used to teach and practise such many things as:

- vocabulary connected with actions (smile, chop, headache, wriggle);
- grammatical items, including tenses past/present/future and continuous aspects (Every morning I clean my teeth, I make my bed, I eat breakfast);
- classroom language (Open your books);
- imperatives/Instructions (Stand up, close you eyes); and

- Story-telling

There is generally no basic text in a Total Physical Response course. Materials and realia have a demanding role, yet in forthcoming learning stages. In this case, the teacher's voice, actions, gestures, and common classroom objects, such as books, pens, cups, and so on are great importance in the learning-teaching process using TPR. The teacher may be required to use pictures, realia, slides, and word charts to set an interactive activity.

According to Muhren (2003), the basic technique of TPR is simple. Learners act out commands given by the teacher or their fellow pupils (at a later stage). These commands, or series of commands, are simple at the beginning (*stand up, sit down*) but after some time they may become more complex (*I want the boys to stand in a circle please*). A TPR sequence can be a chain of actions relating to a compound task (*take pen and paper, sit down, begin at the top of your paper, write down: Dear ...*) or even contain a story-line.

Most importantly, a teacher helps learners to be totally involved in TPR activities so that they can act out what they have heard. There is no pressure on them to speak the foreign language. Before any learner can commence to speak out a foreign language spontaneously as well as creatively, she must feel the inner readiness to do so. When learners are ready, they feel that the words of the language-sound and meaning integrated and combined into larger utterances -spring from *within* themselves. This inner readiness will develop gradually but inevitably with prolonged exposure to the sound of understood language and an active involvement in its meaning.

Here are sample materials used in TPR:

Sample Materials 1:

- Context** : Teaching Vocabulary 1
New words : blue, yellow, green, orange, brown, grey, purple, black, white, card, to pick up
Preparation : A number of small coloured cards, one of more cards on every pupil's desk, a set of cards on a central desk.

Procedures :

1. The teacher picks up cards one by one and says what colour they are.

A blue card.
An orange card.
A yellow card.
A red card.
A brown card.
A grey card.
A purple card.
A black card.
A white card.
A green card.
Red.
Blue.
Purple.

2 The teacher gives commands to the class.

Who's got a red card? Show it to me.
Who's got a blue card? Show it to me.
Who's got a yellow card? Show it to me.

3 The teacher invites individual pupils to come out to the central desk.

Devi, pick up a purple card and show it to the class.
Show the class a black card.
Show the class a green card.
Show the class a grey card.
Ridwan.

Sample Materials 2:

Context : Teaching Vocabulary 2

New words : jump, run, hop, stop, on the spot

Preparation : Every pupil holds a coloured card; there are five of six different colours.

Procedures :

1. The pupils stand in a circle.

2. The teacher gives commands and models the action. After a while he/she stops modeling.

Pupils with blue cards, jump up and down. ... stop.

Pupils with red cards, run on the spot. ... stop.

Pupils with yellow cards, hop one one leg. ... stop.

Pupils with brown cards, walk on the spot. ... stop.

Pupils with orange cards, hop on your left foot. ... stop.

Blue cards, run on the spot. ... Don't stop.

White cards, jump up and down. ... Don't stop.

Brown cards, walk on the spot. ... Don't stop.

Blue cards, stop running on the spot.

Orange cards, hop on right leg. ... Don't stop.

Brown cards, stop walking on the spot.

Sample Materials 3:

Context : Teaching Vocabulary 3

New words : chalk, coloured chalk, eraser, paper, pen, pencil, book, exercise book to take, to come, to sit, to hold up

Preparations: : The above items are on a central desk or table and (a number of them) on the pupils' desks (i.e. the items normally present there).

Procedures :

1 *The teacher identifies the objects by simply picking them up from the desk and saying their names.*

A piece of chalk. White chalk.

Coloured chalks.

An eraser.

A sheet of paper.

A pen.

A pencil.

A book.

An exercise book

Again. A piece of chalk.

Coloured chalk.

2 The teacher gives the class commands relating to the items on the pupils's desks.

Hold up your pens.
Put down your pens.
Hold up your pencils.
Put them down.
Hold up your books.
Put them down.
Show me your erasers.
Show me your exercise books.
Show me your books.

Sample Materials 4: Teaching Series of Vocabulary in Action

Going out for a walk.
(You are listening to the radio.)
Stand up from your chair.
Go to the radio.
Turn it off.
Go to the window.
Look outside.
Sit down again.
Pick up your shoes.
Put them in front of you.
Pull up your socks.
Put your shoes on.
Stand up.
Walk to the door.
Open it.
Go outside.
Close the door behind you.
Take out your key.
Put it in the keyhole.
Lock the door.
Look up at the sky.
Walk away.

Sample Materials 5: Teaching Series of Vocabulary in Action

Writing a letter.
Pick up your pen.
Begin at the top of the paper: *Dear...*
Write your letter.
Look up from your paper.
Look sad.
Put down your pen.
Rub your eyes.
Pick up your pen.
Go on writing.
Stop writing.
Put down your pen.
Put one hand under your chin.
Think.
Look happy.
Go on writing.
Look up at the clock behind you.
Finish your letter.
Fold the letter.
Take an envelope.
Put the letter inside.
Lick the flap, stick it down.
Write the address on the envelope.
Pick up a stamp, lick it, stick it on.
Stand up.
Run to the letterbox outside.
Hurry up! Hurry up!

Sample Materials 6:

Context : Teaching Present Continuous

New words : stand up, sit down, turn, hop, march, etc.

Preparations : The teacher expresses sentences in the meantime she gives facial expressions and body movement so that learners comprehend what the teacher commands. In addition, the teacher should provide real objects such as toothpaste/brush, comb, cloth, plate/spoon, etc.

Going to School.

I am waking up.

I am rubbing my eyes.

I am yawning.

I am stretching.

I am getting up.

I am going to bath room.

I am washing my face.

I am brushing my teeth.

I am going to bed room.

I am combing my hair.

I am getting dressed.

I am walking to the kitchen.

I am having breakfast.

I am putting on my backpack

I am saying my mother or mt father 'Good bye'

I am opening the door.

I am walking to school.

Sample Materials 7: Teaching Series of Vocabulary in An Action Song

Children enjoy singing. There are lots of action songs. The pupils sing and act out the words of the song. Here is an example of an action song.

This is the way you wash your face.

wash your face, wash your face.

This is the way you wash your face.

All on a Saturday morning.

This is the way you wash your hands.

wash your hands, wash your hands.

This is the way you wash your hands.

All on a Sunday morning.

This is the way you brush your teeth (...).
All on a Monday morning.

This is the way you brush your hair (...).
All on a Tuesday morning.

This is the way you clean your shoes (...).
All on a Wednesday morning.

This is the way you eat your food.
All on a Thursday morning.

This is the way you drink your tea (...).
All on a Friday morning.

You may know other songs which are full of actions and can be used in the same way.

CONCLUSIONS

When TPR is applied in the classroom, a teacher is required to provide a model. The model has three vital features: 1) grasping the spoken language must come prior to speaking, 2) comprehension is developed through body movement, and 3) the period of listening period helps a learner to be ready to speak. Such a model does not force the learner to speak. It is also recommended that TPR be applied for only short periods of time because the learner will get tired of doing it.

The TPR method also emphasizes two crucial elements: the use of movement as a memory enhancer and imperatives as the only method of instruction—the teacher uses commands to direct the learners.

Most importantly, when applying such a method, the use of mother tongue is deemphasized. If there are abstract words, a teacher is required to write down them on the white/black boards without expressing those words. The meaning of words is comprehended generally through an action.

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