

Total Physical Response and Its Classroom Application

--Haiyun TCI Practice Series (2)

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Part I: What Is Total Physical Response?

Total Physical Response (TPR) is one of the most powerful tools we can use in a language classroom. It is a comprehension-based strategy and built on the coordination of language and physical movements. In TPR, instructors give commands with body movement to students in a target language, students respond with whole-body actions.

Dr. James Asher (2009), the initiator of TPR, was puzzled by his own language learning experience in school, because he had no trouble mastering other school subjects, but only had trouble with languages. Therefore, he was determined to embark on a journey to discover the secret to foreign language acquisition. He observed that children spend at least the first year of their lives in listening comprehension before they even utter a single word. The caretaking languages that children often receive are full of commands and directions and are filled with facial expressions, emotions, and gestures which helps make them comprehensible and compelling. In addition, many children have acquired a large amount of vocabulary before entering school which indicates that language is not acquired in school only. Also, to determine whether or not the popular belief of children's superiority in language learning is a myth, Dr. Asher designed an experiment in which they offered similar Russian lessons, synchronized with body movements, to adults as well as children. The result was inspirational. When adults had the opportunity to acquire language through body movement, they actually outperformed children of all ages. Children's superiority only remained in the domain of pronunciation.

Here are the characteristics of TPR that can help understand the reasons for the practice. First of all, it offers multi-sensory input: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Secondly, it provides memoizable chunks rather than isolated word-by-word instruction. Thirdly, it helps students to internalize input faster and retain what has been acquired longer. Fourthly, TPR instructions create a unique phenomenon in which "output-is-more-than-input". Learners can not only respond to the exact utterances used in training, but also understand novel commands as well. Fifthly, TPR instructions create a pleasant and enjoyable learning atmosphere. In terms of current theory, it reduces the Affective Filter. Last, it taps into the power of how the brain acquires information best.

Part II: TPR Instructional Procedures

Some teachers use TPR solely for 6 weeks (approximately 150 – 200 words) and then ease into other Comprehensible Input based instructions. Others might mix TPR with different TCI (Teaching with Comprehensible Input) strategies from Day 1.

1. Classroom Set-up

(1) Seating Arrangement:

A classic TPR classroom typically contains three “Home Base Chairs” in the back as Ramiro Garcia (2009) explained it. This is where TPR instruction starts. The teacher often sits in the middle while she invites two students to sit on her side. The rest of the classroom is divided into two halves, facing each other. The advantage of this particular set up is that it provides more flexibility when offering varied instructions: in different groups, pairs and individuals, using modeling with oral commands, or oral commands only, etc.

However, different setups are possible. Some teachers have their students sit in a “U” shape in class and some others have a semi-circle formed in their classroom.

(2) Visual Aids:

Classroom expressions, survival phrases, rejoinders, and high frequency verbs are made into posters and posted in the classroom. Realia and props are stored in the classroom as well. This allows the teacher to offer rich and dynamic instructions and easily make input comprehensible. It also helps to lower students’ affective filters.

(3) Grouping:

There are many ways to assign students into various groups: by country, by famous landmarks, cities, historical events, and figures, or simply by different favorite foods, fruits, beverages, or animals. Often, teaching thematically is still required by many school districts. For example, I like to start with famous cities in China: Team of Xi’an, Team of Beijing, Team of Hong Kong, or Team of Shanghai. Similarly, there could be the Team of Great Wall, Team of Hua Shan, or Team of Yellow River. The most outrageous teams I came up with are: Team of Stinky tofu (臭豆腐队), Team of Chicken Feet (鸡爪子队), Team of Roast Duck (烤鸭队), and Team of Dumplings (水饺队). Kids often love these names. On a piece of paper, I have a team name in both character and pinyin accompanying by a photo. If it is possible, I suggest laminating them for reuse.

2. The Classic TPR Procedure

The classic TPR procedure normally contains the following steps: demo, delay demo, remove demo, and assess. During the assessment stage, there are some specific strategies as well: eyes closed, in sequence, in random order,

various groups, to illustrate the actions, novel commands, and chain commands, etc. Lastly, reading can be added.

(1) Steps in detail

“Demo” means that a teacher demonstrates an action or gesture while giving verbal commands. After students become confident in responding to the teacher’s commands, then, TPR teachers use “delay demo,” that is, the teacher gives the verbal commands prior performing the action, acting out the commands soon as she observes hesitation. The next stage is “remove demo”: upon sensing that the majority of students show great confidence in what they are doing, the teacher removes her demonstration completely.

“Assess”: Assessing students’ acquisition takes place throughout the whole class period. In this way, teachers know how to pace the class, who needs extra attention or assistance, and who needs extra challenges.

A simple requirement such as “eyes closed” reveals a great deal about who has acquired what, and who is still struggling. It also discloses which vocabulary items have been stored in the brain, which ones still need further input.

(2) The 9-square activity method

One of the challenges many teachers of Chinese is face is the difficulty of “thinking on their feet” in creating different combinations and providing instructions as well assessing students in random orders. Seasoned TCI practitioners and teachers’ coaches, Teri Wiechart and Gary Dibianca (2014) invented a 9-square activity to be used in these situations (see Table 1). It’s quite simple yet effective.

Table 1 *A 9-square Form Developed for Learning Activities*

走	跑	停
站起来	坐下	看
快地	不	慢慢地

Steps to break down the 9 square activity:

Step 1: Choose any three vocabulary items as a group. You can choose vertically, horizontally or diagonally. Introduce one group at a time using classic TPR procedures and various assessment strategies.

Step 2: After all three groups have been introduced, mix them up. You can give oral commands by simply following the square from left to right, right to left, top to bottom, bottom to top or diagonally. This will guarantee covering all possible combinations.

Step 3: Novel commands. Input can be made more interesting by combining the words you have introduced. For example, “don’t”, “slowly”, and “walk”. Which combination could you come up with?

Step 4: Chain commands. Even more interesting are chain commands, e.g., when teachers feel students are ready, presenting 不慢慢地走, 快地跑, 不停不坐下.

Subsequent commands include illustrations. Students can be commanded to draw a representation what of what the teacher has said.

In addition, TPR teachers can point to commands written on flash cards (Pinyin or Pinyin and Chinese characters together).

Part III: Additional TPR based strategies: The Three-Ring-Circus

There are some limitations on TPR. The first one is that the vocabulary has to be concrete and result in an observable action. It is difficult to use TPR to get across words such as “ideal”, “hope” or “greedy”. If one solely uses TPR and gives commands, a dead-end will be reached rather quickly. Another limitation of TPR comes from the usage of command forms. Commands forms are not much a problem in Chinese. However, for a language like Spanish or German, when gender, pronoun and tenses, etc. all require agreement, teaching only command forms runs the risk of introducing incorrect grammatical patterns. Therefore, a world-renown TPR trainer, Bertha Segal Cook (1998), invented a technique called “Three-Ring-Circus”. It allows presenting input with a variety of tense, conjugations and agreements from the beginning and in a natural way.

The Three-Ring-Circus Procedure: 1) Select three TPR words; 2) Use the classic TPR procedure to present these words; 3) Enlist three student volunteers and assign them one action each; 4) Place them into different corners in the classroom; 5) All students perform their actions individually at the same time; 6) The teacher asks questions about who is doing what.

Example for the Three-Ring-Circus Procedure:

Scenario:

Sam is looking at Celia.

Johnny is crying.

Charlie is running.

Questions teacher asks:

Is Sam crying?

Is Sam running?

Is Sam looking at Celia or Johnny looking at Celia?

Is Sam looking at Celia or Ivy?

Who is Sam looking at?

Who is looking at Celia?

Is Celia looking at Sam?

Typically, the class only needs to respond with one-word answers: Yes, no, a name or an object. As the class progresses students eventually start to respond with two and three-words, short phrases or longer phrases and complete sentences.

Here is an example of teaching numbers with TPR: 1) Write a number on a flashcard and create a deck of numbers (1-10). 2) Give two numbers (5 & 8) to a student. 3) Ask questions such as:

Sam, 把 5 给 Carson。

谁有 5?

Sam 有 5 吗?

Charlie 有 5 吗?

Carson 有 5 吗?

Sam 有 8 吗?

Carson 有 8 吗?

Sam 有 5 还是 Carson 有 5?

Sam 有 8 还是 Carson 有 8?

谁有 5?

谁有 8?

Sam 有什么?

Carson 有什么?

Part IV: Expanding TPR

Krashen (2013 & 2015) suggests that there is even more we can do with TPR, especially if we are not limited by having to work on target structures. We could expend TPR into the following areas:

- Exercise and Yoga instructions
- Cooking
- Martial arts and simple self-defense moves
- Simple magic tricks
- Origami
- Party games
- Party tricks
- Dance
- Outdoor survival skills

Slocum-Bailey wrote “Linear procedures—a repeated sequence of actions, for instance, or step-by-step instructions—tend to work well, because they involve a limited amount of vocabulary, much of which is naturally repeated, and students listen for understanding in order to be able to follow or complete the action.” (Slocum-Bailey, 2016, p. 20)

Personally, I have implemented “Guided Meditation”, in several ways, e.g., “body scan”, “mindful eating” and “tapping” in class as well. It not only provides compelling comprehensible input, but it also helps students to acquire life skills for self-regulation and self-reliance.

Conclusion

Krashen 1998 has pointed out that “TPR is not a complete method. It cannot do the entire job of language teaching, nor was it designed to do this.” (Krashen, 1998, p. 94) There are other ways to provide comprehensible input to beginning students, such as TPRS, Story-Listening, Embedded Reading and Movie Talk. TPR has made an important contribution and nearly all successful methods have included movement as a means of making input more comprehensible, though.

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