

Tikrit University

Collage of Education for Humanities

English Department



Techniques & principles in language teaching

Third Year

Total Physical Response

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Total Physical Response (TPR):

Introduction

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a language teaching method developed by American psychologist **James J. Asher** in the 1960s. It is based on the idea that language learning is most effective when it involves both **the mind and the body**. In TPR, students respond to commands in the target language by performing **physical actions**, such as standing up, walking, or picking up objects.

The central concept of TPR is that **language comprehension should precede production**, much like how children learn their first language. Babies listen to language for months before they begin to speak. During this period, they develop understanding through repeated exposure and physical interaction with their environment. TPR aims to recreate this natural language acquisition process in the classroom.

Theoretical Background

TPR is rooted in several psychological theories, particularly from the field of **behavioral psychology** and **language acquisition**:

1. Comprehension-Based Learning

Asher argued that before students speak, they must first **understand the language**. Listening comprehension is developed through exposure to commands that are followed by physical responses. This reduces pressure and builds confidence before students are required to speak.

2. Right-Brain Involvement

TPR emphasizes the use of **motor activity**, which engages the **right hemisphere of the brain**—the part responsible for physical

movement, rhythm, and spatial understanding. By linking movement to language, TPR enhances memory and learning.

3. Stress-Free Learning

Traditional language learning can create **anxiety**, especially when learners are forced to speak before they are ready. TPR eliminates this stress by focusing on **non-verbal responses** in the early stages. Students can remain silent until they feel confident enough to speak.

Key Features of TPR

1. Use of Commands

In TPR, the teacher gives **imperative sentences** (commands) in the target language, and students demonstrate understanding by acting them out. For example:

- "Stand up."
- "Open the door."
- "Pick up the book and put it on the table."

These commands gradually become more complex as learners improve.

2. Physical Movement

TPR is unique in its heavy use of **body movement**. Learners **act out** what they hear. This makes the learning experience engaging, fun, and memorable. The physical activity helps reinforce vocabulary and grammar structures.

3. Delayed Speech

Students are **not forced to speak** until they are ready. In the early stages, they only listen and act. Speaking develops naturally over time, once comprehension is strong.

4. Low-Anxiety Environment

Because students are not immediately required to produce the language, they feel **less pressure**. Making mistakes is acceptable, and the classroom atmosphere remains **positive and supportive**.

5. Rapid Vocabulary Development

TPR is especially effective for teaching **action verbs**, **prepositions**, **classroom objects**, and **daily routines**. Students can quickly build a large vocabulary by physically interacting with the words.

Structure of a TPR Lesson

A typical TPR lesson involves the following steps:

1. Introduction of Commands

The teacher introduces 3–5 new verbs by performing actions and saying the commands. Students watch and listen.

Example:

- The teacher says "Stand up" while standing.
- The teacher says "Sit down" while sitting.

2. Student Response

Students are asked to follow the same commands physically. They do not need to speak, just act.

3. Mixing and Repeating Commands

The teacher begins to combine and repeat the commands in random order to reinforce memory.

Example:

- "Stand up. Turn around. Sit down."







4. New Vocabulary

Once students have mastered the initial set of actions, the teacher introduces new vocabulary or phrases, possibly using real objects (realia) or visuals.

5. Student-Led Actions

Eventually, students begin to give commands to each other. This marks the transition from comprehension to **language production**.

Advantages of TPR

-  **Fun and Engaging:** The physical element keeps students active and interested.
 -  **Good for Beginners:** TPR is especially effective for children or beginner-level learners.
 -  **Natural Learning Process:** Imitates first-language acquisition.
 -  **Supports Memory:** Physical movement aids retention of vocabulary.
 -  **No Immediate Pressure to Speak:** Reduces learner anxiety.
 -  **Adaptable:** Can be used with individuals or groups, and with limited materials.
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Limitations of TPR

While TPR is highly effective in certain contexts, it does have some limitations:

- **Not Suitable for All Content:** Abstract concepts, complex grammar, or academic topics are difficult to teach through physical response.
 - **Limited Student Speaking Time:** Students may become too passive if the method is overused without transitioning to speaking and writing.
 - **Classroom Management:** In large classes, coordinating physical activity can be challenging.
 - **Adult Learners May Feel Awkward:** Some adults may resist physical movement in a classroom setting.
 - **Teacher Creativity Required:** Teachers must constantly create new actions and activities to maintain engagement.
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Practical Examples of TPR Activities

1. Simon Says

A classic TPR game where students must follow commands only if the teacher says "Simon says" first. This builds listening skills and quick comprehension.

2. Action Storytelling

The teacher tells a short story using actions (e.g., "The cat jumps on the table. The dog runs away."). Students act out the story as they listen.

3. Classroom Commands

Routine commands like "Open your book," "Write your name," and "Look at the board" can be used daily.

4. Object Games

The teacher says, "Touch the red book," or "Pick up the pencil and give it to Maria," helping students learn objects and prepositions.

Conclusion

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a powerful method that brings language learning to life through **movement and interaction**. By removing the fear of speaking and focusing first on **comprehension**, TPR allows learners to build confidence and internalize the language naturally. Although it may not be suitable for teaching all aspects of a language, it is a highly effective tool for **introducing vocabulary, building listening skills**, and making the classroom dynamic and enjoyable.

TPR is especially useful with **young learners, beginners**, and **language learners in the early stages**, but it can also be creatively adapted for older students and more advanced levels. When combined with other methods, TPR forms a **valuable part of a communicative language teaching approach**.