

## **TPR in the primary classroom**

### **What is TPR?**

"Open your books!" What is the answer to this frequent instruction given by teachers? There is no correct linguistic response, the correct response is a physical action.

The basis of Total Physical Response is seen in every day, in every classroom, in every school, in every country around the world. It is based on the idea that the natural response to understanding a command is a physical response.

Physical responses have been used by teachers, particularly primary school teachers, for many thousands of years. "Stand up!" "Sit down!" "Clap your hands!" "Touch your nose!"

### **Total Physical Response**

The mysterious ideas of TPR first developed by Asher in the mid-1960s were little more than the traditional techniques of primary school teachers being used for the first time with adults.

So often, the great experts on methodology think they have 'invented the wheel' when they discover aspects of learning which primary teachers have known for years.

As usual, these famous methodologists took what is basically a simple idea and developed it into a complicated and 'original' theory.

### **Physical aspects of learning**

TPR is associated with the idea that we all learn in different media. The memory we use when learning to tie shoelaces or to ride a bicycle is kinaesthetic memory or 'muscle memory' as athletes say. This is, of course, just one of the different 'intelligences' we use when learning a foreign language.

The use of kinaesthetic intelligence and memory is particularly important when we are teaching young children because we know that they do not learn in a conscious intellectual way. In simple terms, children do not learn by thinking, but by 'doing' things.

TPR is very popular with teachers who have studied TPR techniques but it has gained an unjustified bad reputation amongst other teachers. These teachers see the TPR classroom as noisy and undisciplined. TPR does not deserve this bad reputation because there are many useful techniques which are possible even in large, over-crowded classrooms.

### **Physical response**

Everyone learns to comprehend much faster than they learn to produce. At any stage in the learning process, comprehension is about four times as great as production. Children may not be able to give a linguistic response to your instructions but they can give a physical response.

For this reason, a teaching technique based on commands is often used with young children.

Point to the window!  
Point to the duck!  
Show me the duck!  
Put the duck on the chair!  
Put the yellow duck on the chair and the red duck on the desk!  
Draw a big duck on the pond and a small duck near the gate!  
Draw an old man under the tree!

A child will be willing to demonstrate comprehension through a physical action long before he/she is willing to give a linguistic response.

The use of real objects in the classroom and the use of picture flashcards allows the teacher and children to **respond** to language long before they can respond linguistically.

### **The 'silent period'**

We have all observed that people who learn foreign languages outside the classroom, go through a 'silent period'. This is a period during which they begin to understand the language but do not have the confidence to speak it. This is a perfectly natural behaviour which we can observe amongst adults as well as children.

In the school classroom we are eager to have our students 'speaking' as quickly as possible. Some people think that if we 'force' children to speak English before they feel they are 'ready' to do so, this can have a damaging effect on their learning. In particular, some people have suggested that 'L1 interference errors' are caused by forcing learners to produce the foreign language before they are ready. They suggest that when we ask learners to express an idea which they cannot express in English, they always use an 'English' form of their mother tongue (L1).

### **Learning to touch the language**

Children are very tactile, they love touching things. We can exploit this love of touching in our teaching. We can ask children to 'touch something red'.

In **Buzz** we can find action chants such as this:

Pick up, put down,  
Stand up, Turn round,  
Clap left, clap right,  
Clap up, clap down,  
Turn round, sit down,  
Touch something ... brown!

Children recite the chant with the cassette and carry out the actions.

Another popular activity, also from *Buzz*, helps children to remember their prepositions of place. Starting with their hands help on either side of their face they say and do the following movements:

Next to, under,  
Next to, on,  
Next to, in front of,  
Next to, behind,  
Next to, up,  
Next to, down,  
Next to, out,  
Next to, in!

The children end the chant with both hands in their mouths!

### **Touching and reading**

When we begin reading with young children we often ask them to 'find and touch' a special word. When we are reading a story with children, we can start by asking children to touch characters in the pictures. Later, they find and touch names of characters in the text. Gradually, we ask them to touch names of places (if they start with capital letters). As their word recognition improves, we ask them to touch other words, verbs, prepositions and so on.

The next stage is called 'finger reading' as the children listen to the teacher or the cassette and follow the text with their fingers.

This physical contact with the printed word is an important early step in learning to read.

### **Miming words**

Some words, particularly adjectives, can be communicated through mime. So if children learn to mime 'BIG', 'small', 'tall', 'heavy', 'beautiful', 'horrible', they are not only being creative and expressive physically, they are remembering the words with their 'muscle memories'. Children can also mime trains, horses, aeroplanes, rockets, racing cars, eating ice-creams, bananas, apples, spaghetti, or soup, they can mime running, typing, singing, laughing, putting a video cassette in the VCR, posting a letter, sleeping, waking up, cleaning their teeth, having a shower, they can mime being happy, hungry, tired, miserable, frightened, ... (you try to finish the list!)

### **The Physical Attitude**

As you can see, there is nothing mysterious about TPR. The teacher exploits all opportunities to include a physical dimension in learning. This can extend from simple commands to making words from plasticine 'snakes'. Children love touching things, particularly when they have a special texture. Children love movement and can learn language through movement.

When you meet friends who are not teachers do they notice that you are 'different'?  
Yes, they do, because you speak more slowly and clearly than other people. You use

your facial expressions, your hands and your body to communicate your ideas. Why do you do this? Because you are a good teacher!

You are physical in your communication, so encourage your children to be physical. As you plan your lessons, 'Think Physical!' Ask yourself "What can the children do?" Ask yourself how you can build in a physical dimension to their learning.

If you have the space in your classroom, it is very nice for the children to move around. But if your classroom is small and crowded, think what the children can do while they are sitting or standing at their desks.

### **So, what's the secret?**

The secret is simple. Physical responses are very good ways to respond to language you have understood. Physical actions bring language to life and make it easier to remember.

### **TPR in textbooks**

Ideas for TPR activities can be found in many textbooks and teachers who like TPR techniques can apply them with all teaching materials. **Eko and Tina**, a starter course for young learners, is particularly rich in TPR activities. This is natural particularly in level 1 because the children have not yet started to write or recognise written text. For example in Unit 5 (My House) children listen and point to items of furniture as they hear this song:

One, two, three, four  
Point to the door  
And turn around  
One, two, three, four  
Point to the window  
And touch the ground  
One, two, three, four  
Point to the table  
And turn around  
One, two, three, four  
Point to the chair  
And touch the ground.  
Chorus  
Turn around, touch the ground,  
Turn around, touch the ground.

**Eko and Tina** exploits a wide range of different TPR techniques including 'Draw in the Air'.

### **Conclusions**

Total Physical Response techniques are very useful to teachers of young children particularly before they begin to read and write. But do not think that TPR techniques cannot be used when teaching adult business people. TPR is useful for all learners and teachers.