

Background

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a language teaching method built around the coordination of speech and action; it attempts to teach language through physical (motor) activity. Developed by James Asher, a professor of psychology at San Jose State University, California, it draws on several traditions, including developmental psychology, learning theory, and humanistic pedagogy, as well as on language teaching procedures proposed by Harold and Dorothy Palmer in 1925. Let us briefly consider these precedents to Total Physical Response.

Total Physical Response is linked to the "trace theory" of memory in psychology (e.g., Katona 1940), which holds that the more often or the more intensively a memory connection is traced, the stronger the memory association will be and the more likely it will be recalled. Retracing can be done verbally (e.g., by rote repetition) and/or in association with motor activity. Combined tracing activities, such as verbal rehearsal accompanied by motor activity, hence increase the probability of successful recall.

In a developmental sense, Asher sees successful adult second language learning as a parallel process to child first language acquisition. He claims that speech directed to young children consists primarily of commands, which children respond to physically before they begin to produce verbal responses. Asher feels adults should recapitulate the processes by which children acquire their mother tongue.

Asher shares with the school of humanistic psychology a concern for the role of affective (emotional) factors in language learning. A method that is undemanding in terms of linguistic production and that involves gamelike movements reduces learner stress, he believes, and creates a positive mood in the learner, which facilitates learning.

Asher's emphasis on developing comprehension skills before the learner is taught to speak links him to a movement in foreign language teaching sometimes referred to as the Comprehension Approach (Winitz 1981). This refers to several different comprehension-based language teaching proposals, which share the belief that (a) comprehension abilities precede productive skills in learning a language; (b) the teaching of speaking should be delayed until comprehension skills are established; (c) skills

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acquired through listening transfer to other skills; (d) teaching should emphasize meaning rather than form; and (e) teaching should minimize learner stress.

The emphasis on comprehension and the use of physical actions to teach a foreign language at an introductory level has a long tradition in language teaching. We saw in Chapter 1 that in the nineteenth century Gouin had advocated a situationally based teaching strategy in which a chain of action verbs served as the basis for introducing and practicing new language items. Palmer experimented with an action-based teaching strategy in his book *English Through Actions* (first published in Tokyo in 1925 and ultimately reissued as Palmer and Palmer in 1959), which claimed that "no method of teaching foreign speech is likely to be economical or successful which does not include in the first period a very considerable proportion of that type of classroom work which consists of the carrying out by the pupil of orders issued by the teacher" (Palmer and Palmer 1959: 39).

Approach

Theory of language

Asher does not directly discuss the nature of language or how languages are organized. However, the labeling and ordering of TPR classroom drills seem to be built on assumptions that owe much to structuralist or grammar-based views of language. Asher states that "most of the grammatical structure of the target language and hundreds of vocabulary items can be learned from the skillful use of the imperative by the instructor" (1977: 4). He views the verb, and particularly the verb in the imperative, as the central linguistic motif around which language use and learning are organized.

Asher sees language as being composed of abstractions and nonabstractions, with nonabstractions being most specifically represented by concrete nouns and imperative verbs. He believes that learners can acquire a "detailed cognitive map" as well as "the grammatical structure of a language" without recourse to abstractions.

Abstractions should be delayed until students have internalized a detailed cognitive map of the target language. Abstractions are not necessary for people to decode the grammatical structure of a language. Once students have internalized the code, abstractions can be introduced and explained in the target language. (Asher 1977: 11–12)

This is an interesting claim about language but one that is insufficiently detailed to test. For example, are tense, aspect, articles, and so forth, abstractions, and if so, what sort of "detailed cognitive map" could be constructed without them?

Despite Asher's belief in the central role of comprehension in language learning, he does not elaborate on the relation between comprehension, production, and communication (he has no theory of speech acts or their equivalents, for example), although in advanced TPR lessons imperatives are used to initiate different speech acts, such as requests ("John, ask Mary to walk to the door"), and apologies ("Ned, tell Jack you're sorry").

Asher also refers to the fact that language can be internalized as wholes or chunks, rather than as single lexical items, and, as such, links are possible to more theoretical proposals of this kind (e.g., Miller, Galanter, and Pribram 1960), as well as to work on the role of prefabricated patterns in language learning and language use (e.g., Yorio 1980). Asher does not elaborate on his view of chunking, however, nor on other aspects of the theory of language underlying Total Physical Response. We have only clues to what a more fully developed language theory might resemble when spelled out by Asher and his supporters.

Theory of learning

Asher's language learning theories are reminiscent of the views of other behavioral psychologists. For example, the psychologist Arthur Jensen proposed a seven-stage model to describe the development of verbal learning in children. The first stage he calls Sv-R type learning, which the educational psychologist John DeCecco interprets as follows:

In Jensen's notation, Sv refers to a verbal stimulus—a syllable, a word, a phrase, and so on. R refers to the physical movements the child makes in response to the verbal stimulus (or Sv). The movement may involve touching, grasping, or otherwise manipulating some object. For example, mother may tell Percival (age 1) to get the ball, and Percival, distinguishing the sound "ball" from the clatter of other household noises, responds by fetching the ball and bringing it to his mother. Ball is the Sv (verbal stimulus), and Percival's action is the response. At Percival's age, children respond to words about four times faster than they respond to other sounds in their environment. It is not clear why this is so, but it is possible that the reinforcing effects of making proper responses to verbal stimuli are sufficiently strong to cause a rapid development of this behavior. Sv-R learning represents, then, the simplest form of verbal behavior. (DeCecco 1968: 329)

This is a very similar position to Asher's view of child language acquisition. Although learning psychologists such as Jensen have since abandoned such simple stimulus-response models of language acquisition and development, and although linguists have rejected them as incapable of accounting for the fundamental features of language learning and use (see Chapter 4), Asher still sees a stimulus-response view as providing the learning theory underlying language teaching pedagogy. In addition,

Asher has elaborated an account of what he feels facilitates or inhibits foreign language learning. For this dimension of his learning theory he draws on three rather influential learning hypotheses:

1. There exists a specific innate bio-program for language learning, which defines an optimal path for first and second language development.
2. Brain lateralization defines different learning functions in the left- and right-brain hemispheres.
3. Stress (an affective filter) intervenes between the act of learning and what is to be learned; the lower the stress, the greater the learning.

Let us consider how Asher views each of these in turn.

1. THE BIO-PROGRAM

Asher's Total Physical Response is a "Natural Method" (see Chapter 1), inasmuch as Asher sees first and second language learning as parallel processes. Second language teaching and learning should reflect the naturalistic processes of first language learning. Asher sees three processes as central. (a) Children develop listening competence before they develop the ability to speak. At the early stages of first language acquisition they can understand complex utterances that they cannot spontaneously produce or imitate. Asher speculates that during this period of listening, the learner may be making a mental "blueprint" of the language that will make it possible to produce spoken language later. (b) Children's ability in listening comprehension is acquired because children are required to respond physically to spoken language in the form of parental commands. (c) Once a foundation in listening comprehension has been established, speech evolves naturally and effortlessly out of it. As we noted earlier, these principles are held by proponents of a number of other method proposals and are referred to collectively as a Comprehension Approach.

Parallel to the processes of first language learning, the foreign language learner should first internalize a "cognitive map" of the target language through listening exercises. Listening should be accompanied by physical movement. Speech and other productive skills should come later. The speech-production mechanisms will begin to function spontaneously when the basic foundations of language are established through listening training. Asher bases these assumptions on his belief in the existence in the human brain of a bio-program for language, which defines an optimal order for first and second language learning.

A reasonable hypothesis is that the brain and nervous system are biologically programmed to acquire language . . . in a particular sequence and in a particular mode. The sequence is listening before speaking and the mode is to synchronize language with the individual's body. (Asher 1977: 4)

2. BRAIN LATERALIZATION

Asher sees Total Physical Response as directed to right-brain learning, whereas most second language teaching methods are directed to left-brain learning. Asher refers to neurological studies of the brains of cats and studies of an epileptic boy whose corpus callosum was surgically divided. Asher interprets these as demonstrating that the brain is divided into hemispheres according to function, with language activities centralized in the right hemisphere. Drawing on work by Jean Piaget, Asher holds that the child language learner acquires language through motor movement – a right-hemisphere activity. Right-hemisphere activities must occur before the left hemisphere can process language for production.

Similarly, the adult should proceed to language mastery through right-hemisphere motor activities, while the left hemisphere watches and learns. When a sufficient amount of right-hemisphere learning has taken place, the left hemisphere will be triggered to produce language and to initiate other, more abstract language processes.

3. REDUCTION OF STRESS

An important condition for successful language learning is the absence of stress. First language acquisition takes place in a stress-free environment, according to Asher, whereas the adult language learning environment often causes considerable stress and anxiety. The key to stress-free learning is to tap into the natural bio-program for language development and thus to recapture the relaxed and pleasurable experiences that accompany first language learning. By focusing on meaning interpreted through movement, rather than on language forms studied in the abstract, the learner is said to be liberated from self-conscious and stressful situations and is able to devote full energy to learning.

Design

Objectives

The general objectives of Total Physical Response are to teach oral proficiency at a beginning level. Comprehension is a means to an end, and the ultimate aim is to teach basic speaking skills. A TPR course aims to produce learners who are capable of an uninhibited communication that is intelligible to a native speaker. Specific instructional objectives are not elaborated, for these will depend on the particular needs of the learners. Whatever goals are set, however, must be attainable through the use of action-based drills in the imperative form.

The syllabus

The type of syllabus Asher uses can be inferred from an analysis of the exercise types employed in TPR classes. This analysis reveals the use of a sentence-based syllabus, with grammatical and lexical criteria being primary in selecting teaching items. Unlike methods that operate from a grammar-based or structural view of the core elements of language, Total Physical Response requires initial attention to meaning rather than to the form of items. Grammar is thus taught inductively. Grammatical features and vocabulary items are selected not according to their frequency of need or use in target language situations, but according to the situations in which they can be used in the classroom and the ease with which they can be learned.

The criterion for including a vocabulary item or grammatical feature at a particular point in training is ease of assimilation by students. If an item is not learned rapidly, this means that the students are not ready for that item. Withdraw it and try again at a future time in the training program. (Asher 1977: 42)

Asher also suggests that a fixed number of items be introduced at a time, to facilitate ease of differentiation and assimilation. "In an hour, it is possible for students to assimilate 12 to 36 new lexical items depending upon the size of the group and the stage of training" (Asher 1977: 42).

Asher sees a need for attention to both the global meaning of language as well as to the finer details of its organization.

The movement of the body seems to be a powerful mediator for the understanding, organization and storage of macro-details of linguistic input. Language can be internalized in chunks, but alternative strategies must be developed for fine-tuning to macro-details. (Asher, Kusudo, and de la Torre 1974: 28)

A course designed around Total Physical Response principles, however, would not be expected to follow a TPR syllabus exclusively.

We are not advocating only one strategy of learning. Even if the imperative is the major or minor format of training, variety is critical for maintaining continued student interest. The imperative is a powerful facilitator of learning, but it should be used in combination with many other techniques. The optimal combination will vary from instructor to instructor and class to class. (Asher 1977: 28)

Types of learning and teaching activities

Imperative drills are the major classroom activity in Total Physical Response. They are typically used to elicit physical actions and activity on

the part of the learners. Conversational dialogues are delayed until after about 120 hours of instruction. Asher's rationale for this is that "everyday conversations are highly abstract and disconnected; therefore to understand them requires a rather advanced internalization of the target language" (1977: 95). Other class activities include role plays and slide presentations. Role plays center on everyday situations, such as at the restaurant, supermarket, or gas station. The slide presentations are used to provide a visual center for teacher narration, which is followed by commands, and for questions to students, such as "Which person in the picture is the salesperson?". Reading and writing activities may also be employed to further consolidate structures and vocabulary, and as follow-ups to oral imperative drills.

Learner roles

Learners in Total Physical Response have the primary roles of listener and performer. They listen attentively and respond physically to commands given by the teacher. Learners are required to respond both individually and collectively. Learners have little influence over the content of learning, since content is determined by the teacher, who must follow the imperative-based format for lessons. Learners are also expected to recognize and respond to novel combinations of previously taught items:

Novel utterances are recombinations of constituents you have used directly in training. For instance, you directed students with 'Walk to the table!' and 'Sit on the chair!'. These are familiar to students since they have practiced responding to them. Now, will a student understand if you surprise the individual with an unfamiliar utterance that you created by recombining familiar elements (e.g. 'Sit on the table!'). (Asher 1977: 31)

Learners are also required 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 – that is, when a sufficient basis in the language has been internalized.

Teacher roles

The teacher plays an active and direct role in Total Physical Response. "The instructor is the director of a stage play in which the students are the actors" (Asher 1977: 43). It is the teacher who decides what to teach, who models and presents the new materials, and who selects supporting materials for classroom use. The teacher is encouraged to be well prepared and well organized so that the lesson flows smoothly and predictably. Asher recommends detailed lesson plans: "It is wise to write

out the exact utterances you will be using and especially the novel commands because the action is so fast-moving there is usually not time for you to create spontaneously" (1977: 47). Classroom interaction and turn taking is teacher rather than learner directed. Even when learners interact with other learners it is usually the teacher who initiates the interaction:

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

Asher stresses, however, that the teacher's role is not so much to teach as to provide opportunities for learning. The teacher has the responsibility of providing the best kind of exposure to language so that the learner can internalize the basic rules of the target language. Thus the teacher controls the language input the learners receive, providing the raw material for the "cognitive map" that the learners will construct in their own minds. The teacher should also allow speaking abilities to develop in learners at the learners' own natural pace.

In giving feedback to learners, the teacher should follow the example of parents giving feedback to their children. At first, parents correct very little, but as the child grows older, parents are said to tolerate fewer mistakes in speech. Similarly teachers should refrain from too much correction in the early stages and should not interrupt to correct errors, since this will inhibit learners. As time goes on, however, more teacher intervention is expected, as the learners' speech becomes "fine tuned."

Asher cautions teachers about preconceptions that he feels could hinder the successful implementation of TPR principles. First, he cautions against the "illusion of simplicity," where the teacher underestimates the difficulties involved in learning a foreign language. This results in progressing at too fast a pace and failing to provide a gradual transition from one teaching stage to another. The teacher should also avoid having too narrow a tolerance for errors in speaking.

You begin with a wide tolerance for student speech errors, but as training progresses, the tolerance narrows. . . . Remember that as students progress in their training, more and more attention units are freed to process feedback from the instructor. In the beginning, almost no attention units are available to hear the instructor's attempts to correct distortions in speech. All attention is directed to producing utterances. Therefore the student cannot attend efficiently to the instructor's corrections. (Asher 1977: 27)

The role of instructional materials

There is generally no basic text in a Total Physical Response course. Materials and realia play an increasing role, however, in later learning stages. For absolute beginners, lessons may not require the use of ma-

terials, since the teacher's voice, actions, and gestures may be a sufficient basis for classroom activities. Later the teacher may use common classroom objects, such as books, pens, cups, furniture. As the course develops, the teacher will need to make or collect supporting materials to support teaching points. These may include pictures, realia, slides, and word charts. Asher has developed TPR student kits that focus on specific situations, such as the home, the supermarket, the beach. Students may use the kits to construct scenes (e.g., "Put the stove in the kitchen").

Procedure

Asher (1977) provides a lesson-by-lesson account of a course taught according to TPR principles, which serves as a source of information on the procedures used in the TPR classroom. The course was for adult immigrants and consisted of 159 hours of classroom instruction. The sixth class in the course proceeded in the following way:

Review. This was a fast-moving warm-up in which individual students were moved with commands such as:

Pablo, drive your car around Miako and honk your horn.

Jeffe, throw the red flower to Maria.

Maria, scream.

Rita, pick up the knife and spoon and put them in the cup.

Eduardo, take a drink of water and give the cup to Elaine.

New commands. These verbs were introduced.

wash	your hands. your face. your hair. the cup.
look for	a towel. the soap. a comb.
hold	the book. the cup. the soap.
comb	your hair. Maria's hair. Shirou's hair.
brush	your teeth. your pants. the table.

Other items introduced were:

Rectangle	Draw a rectangle on the chalkboard. Pick up a rectangle from the table and give it to me. Put the rectangle next to the square.
Triangle	Pick up the triangle from the table and give it to me. Catch the triangle and put it next to the rectangle.
Quickly	Walk quickly to the door and hit it. Quickly, run to the table and touch the square. Sit down quickly and laugh.
Slowly	Walk slowly to the window and jump. Slowly, stand up. Slowly walk to me and hit me on the arm.
Toothpaste	Look for the toothpaste. Throw the toothpaste to Wing. Wing, unscrew the top of the toothpaste.
Toothbrush	Take out your toothbrush. Brush your teeth. Put your toothbrush in your book.
Teeth	Touch your teeth. Show your teeth to Dolores. Dolores, point to Eduardo's teeth.
Soap	Look for the soap. Give the soap to Elaine. Elaine, put the soap in Ramiro's car.
Towel	Put the towel on Juan's arm. Juan, put the towel on your head and laugh. Maria, wipe your hands on the towel.

Next, the instructor asked simple questions which the student could answer with a gesture such as pointing. Examples would be:

Where is the towel? [Eduardo, point to the towel!]
Where is the toothbrush? [Miako, point to the toothbrush!]
Where is Dolores?

Role reversal. Students readily volunteered to utter commands that manipulated the behavior of the instructor and other students. . . .

Reading and writing. The instructor wrote on the chalkboard each new vocabulary item and a sentence to illustrate the item. Then she spoke each item

and acted out the sentence. The students listened as she read the material. Some copied the information in their notebooks.

(Asher 1977: 54-6)

Conclusion

Total Physical Response is in a sense a revival and extension of Palmer and Palmer's *English Through Actions*, updated with references to more recent psychological theories. It has enjoyed some popularity because of its support by those who emphasize the role of comprehension in second language acquisition. Krashen (1981), for example, regards provision of comprehensible input and reduction of stress as keys to successful language acquisition, and he sees performing physical actions in the target language as a means of making input comprehensible and minimizing stress (see Chapter 9). The experimental support for the effectiveness of Total Physical Response is sketchy (as it is for most methods) and typically deals with only the very beginning stages of learning. Proponents of Communicative Language Teaching would question the relevance to real-world learner needs of the TPR syllabus and the utterances and sentences used within it. Asher himself, however, has stressed that Total Physical Response should be used in association with other methods and techniques. Indeed, practitioners of TPR typically follow this recommendation, suggesting that for many teachers TPR represents a useful set of techniques and is compatible with other approaches to teaching. TPR practices therefore may be effective for reasons other than those proposed by Asher and do not necessarily demand commitment to the learning theories used to justify them.

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