TPR: Still a Very Good Idea

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Asher introduced the idea of teaching languages using Total Physical Response (TPR) over thirty years ago. His first paper on TPR (Asher, 1965) showed how language can be taught using commands: The teacher gives the command, models the movement, and the student performs the action. Students are not asked to speak, only to try to understand and obey the command. The teacher, for example, says "Asseyez-vous!" and sits down and the students also sit. The teacher says "Levez-vous!" and stands up and the students also stand up. Gradually the commands get more complicated (If Susan is wearing a red dress, go to the door and knock twice).

TPR as comprehensible input

TPR is an astoundingly successful beginning language teaching method (or technique). TPR students have outperformed comparison students convincingly in method comparison studies, both in those done by Asher and his associates as well as those done by other scholars (e.g. Wolfe and Jones, 1982). It has been shown to be effective for both children and adults, and has been used for a variety of languages.

Here are just a few of Asher's results: In Asher (1972), adult TPR students of German who had had only 32 hours of instruction outperformed two control groups who had traditional instruction, one that had 40 hours and another that had 80 hours. Baretta (1986) noted that in Asher (1972), the same activity was used as a class activity as well as a post-test, which, he suggests, explains why TPR students of German did

better than controls. Baretta also noted that TPR and control students performed equally on a reading comprehension test. Baretta does not report Asher in full. First, TPR students in Asher (1972) also did better than controls on a listening test that did not include the repeated activity. In addition, controls had 35% more class hours exposure to German and had much more emphasis on reading and writing.

Baretta also points out a reporting error in Krashen (1982). I had claimed that in Asher (1972) TPR students with 32 hours of exposure did as well as controls who had 150 hours of exposure to German. Baretta points out that this was "quite simply not the case" (p. 433). Baretta is correct. As noted in the text, however, TPR students still did spectacularly well in this study and in other studies.

In Asher (1977), TPR Spanish students with 20 hours exposure did better than comparisons with 100 hours on tests of listening and reading, and in Asher, Kusudo and de la Torre (1974), TPR students after 90 hours exceeded the 50th percentile on a standardized Spanish test designed for students who had had 150 hours of instruction.

According to current theory, TPR works because it is an excellent way of providing students with comprehensible input; the teacher's movement provides the background knowledge that makes the command more comprehensible. Evidence that this is so is the finding that those who observe TPR activities do about as well on tests involving physical movement as those who actually do the physical movements (Asher & Price, 1967).

Taking more advantage of TPR

Some earlier versions of TPR focussed each TPR activity on a particular point of grammar. For example, to "practice" definite and indefinite articles in English, one might have an activity such as:

Go to the bookshelf.
Take a book.
Open the book.
Look at the book.
Close the book.
Put the book back on the bookshelf.

Because these activities are constrained by the perceived need to focus on "the grammar rule of day," it is very hard to make them interesting. The good news is that this is not necessary, nor is it helpful for the acquisition of grammar. According to the Input Hypothesis, if enough comprehensible input is available, all the grammar rules that the acquirer is "ready" to acquire will be present in the input (in technical terms, "i+1" will always be there; Krashen, 1982). This takes enormous pressure off the materials developer and gives the teacher much more flex-

ibility: Activities do not have to be done in a certain sequence and not all activities in a collection need to be done. The only requirement is that they provide interesting, comprehensible input. This liberates TPR from the grammatical syllabus. If the Input Hypothesis is correct, all activities that utilize body movement to make input comprehensible and interesting count as TPR.

Thus, any of the following are TPR activities: Learning a dance step or martial arts technique, cooking instruction (put three teaspoons of salt in the pot), learning magic tricks (take the dollar and fold it in half).

A constraint on all activities that we might consider is that they be interesting for both the teacher and the students; it is difficult to fake enthusiasm. Someone with little interest in teaching students magic tricks should try something else.

TPR is not a complete method. It cannot do the entire job of language teaching, nor was it designed to do this. For beginners, there are several other powerful means of supplying comprehensible input, means that utilize other ways of making input comprehensible (e.g. the use of background knowledge and pictures, as in story telling). At the intermediate level, extensive pleasure reading (Krashen, 1993) and sheltered subject matter teaching, a form of content-based language teaching (Krashen, 1991) have produced very good results.

TPR is, however, a breakthrough of enormous importance. Asher was the first in second and foreign language pedagogy to recognize the primacy of comprehension in language development and his insight is applicable on many levels. While of obvious value for beginning language teaching, aspects of TPR can be used for more advanced students (teaching auto or computer repair, complex games), and now that it is free of the constraint of focussing each activity on a particular point of grammar, its use can be expanded.

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