

Over the years we have had a number of articles in the Teacher Trainer by people who could be considered to have founded and developed a particular method for or approach to teaching English to speakers of other languages. (See the articles in this archive by Earl Stevick and Caleb Gattegno.) One of the most immediately useful of the non-mainstream methods so talked about in the seventies is "TPR" or Total Physical Response. It is still being adopted and adapted today by teachers of children, adults, business classes and others.

Motivating children and adults to acquire another language

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At an international conference of educators in England, the keynote speaker opened with these dramatic lines: "It can be done. It can be done. It can be done". This expresses my feeling about the knowledge we now have which will enable most children and adults to acquire a second or a third language more rapidly, with long-term retention and with zero stress.

After the conference the speaker, James Asher, went on to write:

After 20 years of laboratory research followed up with successful application in thousands of classrooms world-wide with languages such as English, French, German, Spanish, Japanese, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic and even the sign language of the deaf, I am confident that we have a learning strategy that will work for most people from infancy to 65 years of age. The approach I call "The Total Physical Response" (TPR) simulates the input that is optimal for the way humans are biologically wired to acquire language as a gift. A gift means that no work is required.

Linguistic scholars discuss how infants acquire their first language, but they always begin their observations when infants start to utter noises that approximate the target language – that is, when production appears, the acquisition process is over. Acquisition of language started and was completed during what I have called "the silent period" which commences almost immediately after birth when parents and others utter directions to the infant such as, "Look at Mommy," "Look at Daddy." "Take Daddy's finger." And the infant responds with a physical movement such as moving the eyes in the direction of the speaker, and later, grasping the parent's finger.

Notice that this transaction between the adult and the infant is a genuine "conversation" in which someone speaks – usually a direction or a request such as "Kiss Daddy"....."Now point to Auntie"..... "Now touch your nose" and the infant answers with a physical motion such as kissing or touching or pointing. Parents have what I call "language-body" conversations with infants in thousands of intimate care-taking situations such as bathing, dressing, eating, drinking, going to the bathroom and playing. For hundreds of hours before the infant utters one word in the target language, the infant is deciphering the pattern of the language, internalizing the sounds – that is, assimilating the phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics – all in the context of "language-body" conversations.

Notice also that speech appears only after the infant has internalized a rather intricate linguistic map of how the language works. It is common for eighteen-month-old infants who are barely able to utter, “mommy” or “daddy”, yet they can respond perfectly to a sophisticated direction such as “David, pick up your red truck and put it on the bed in your room”. Recently a proud grandparent showed me a video tape of his one-year-old grandson. The language-body conversation was as follows:

The grandfather said, “Danny, turn off the television” and the infant walked to the machine and turned it off. Then the adult said “Now turn the television on” and the child responded appropriately. To further test understanding of the one-year-old, the adult said, “Danny turn the volume up” and the infant moved the volume control to comply perfectly. Then, to be sure that the child’s comprehension was accurate, the grandfather uttered, “Turn the volume down” and the child immediately responded with accuracy. Although the speech of the one-year-old was almost non-existent, comprehension was vast as expressed in physical movements the infant used to “converse” with the adult.

When we simulate the “silent period” with “language-body” conversations in the classroom, we discover that almost everyone from children to adults in their sixties can understand another language rapidly, with long-term retention, and with zero stress. Then, as understanding expands and expands, there comes a point when speech appears. This will occur naturally and, as with infants, when speech appears, it will not be perfect; but in time the student will approximate more and more the native speaker. In fact, homework is unnecessary because students have almost complete recall for months – even years. Remember that language is a gift to our species – and a gift means that no work is required.

In summary, then, in the classroom, TPR simulates, at a speeded-up pace, the stages that infants traverse in acquiring their first language. The procedure works because it is in harmony with nature’s biological wiring diagram for the human species to acquire a language – any language.

Notice that TPR turns the traditional “main-stream” English language training inside out. For example, “mainstream” seems to have three features: (a) start with production (i.e., speaking) from which comprehension will be a by-product, (b) organize the course with an overt code (that is, organize the course around the “grammar-point-of-the-day”), and (c) the primary mission is to “teach” people to talk with the fidelity of a native speaker and other skills are ancillary.

By contrast with the “mainstream” approach, TPR: (a) views production (i.e., speaking) as the end-product of comprehension (that is, when the infant or the student in the TPR class spontaneously starts to speak, you are witnessing the end stage of language acquisition,) (b) uses a covert-code (meaning that grammar is assimilated in the context of genuine communication), and (c) asserts that one human being cannot directly “teach” another human being to talk (i.e., parents cannot directly teach an infant to talk because talking appears when the baby is ready to speak and readiness to speak comes only after hundreds of hours in which infants decipher the target language through “language-body” dialogues).

For complimentary articles (and a free TPR book catalogue) that explains further how to apply successfully the “total physical response” in the classroom, Asher invited people to write to: Sky Oaks Productions, Inc., Code C, P.O.Box 1102, Los Gatos, California 95031. In the UK, TPR books and TPR student kits MAY still be obtained from the Keltic English Language Teaching Bookshop which has a presence on the web.

References

- Asher, J.J. Learning Another Language Through Actions: The Complete Teacher’s Guidebook (Expanded Third Edition), 1986.
Asher, J.J. Brainswitching (in press at the time of the article).
Garcia, R. How to Apply TPR for Best Results (Expanded Second Edition), 1987.
All from – Sky Oaks Productions, Inc., P.O. Box 1102, Los Gatos, California 95031.