Pedagogy and Curriculum Innovations
Third Year 2020-2021
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First Semester
Week 4:
Lecture 9:
Total Physical Response (TPR)

TPR: 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.

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.

TPR: Background

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.

TPR: Background

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

TPR: Principles

1. Meaning in the target language can often be conveyed through actions. Memory is activated through learner response. Beginning language instruction should address the right hemisphere of the brain, the part which controls nonverbal behavior. The target language should be presented in chunks, not just word by word.
2. The students' understanding of the target language should be developed before speaking.
3. The imperative is a powerful linguistic device through which the teacher can direct student behavior.
4. Students can learn through observing actions as well as by performing the actions themselves.
5. It is very important that students feel successful. Feelings of success and low anxiety facilitate learning.
6. Students should not be made to memorize fixed routines.

TPR: Principles

7. Correction should be carried out in an unobtrusive manner.
8. Students must develop flexibility in understanding novel combinations of target language chunks. They need to understand more than the exact sentences used in training. Novelty is also motivating.
9. Language learning is more effective when it is fun.
10. Spoken language should be emphasized over written language.
11. Students will begin to speak when they are ready.
12. Students are expected to make errors when they first begin speaking. Teachers should be tolerant of them. Work on the fine details of the language should be postponed until students have become somewhat proficient.

What are the goals of teachers who use TPR?

Teachers who use TPR believe in the importance of having their students enjoy their experience of learning to communicate in another language. In fact, TPR was developed in order to reduce the stress people feel when they are studying other languages and thereby encourage students to persist in their study beyond a beginning level of proficiency.

What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students?

Initially, the teacher is the director of all student behavior. The students are imitators of his nonverbal model. At some point (usually after 10–20 hours of instruction), some students will be 'ready to speak.' At that point, there will be a role reversal with individual students directing the teacher and the other students.

What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process?

The first phase of a lesson is one of modeling. The teacher issues commands to a few students, then performs the actions with them. In the second phase, these same students demonstrate that they can understand the commands by performing them alone. The observers also have an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding. The teacher next recombines elements of the commands to have students develop flexibility in understanding unfamiliar utterances. These commands, which students perform, are often humorous. After learning to respond to some oral commands, the students learn to read and write them. When students are ready to speak, they become the ones who issue the commands. After students begin speaking, activities expand to include skits and games.

What is the nature of student-teacher & student-student interaction?

The teacher interacts with the whole group of students and with individual students. Initially, the interaction is characterized by the teacher speaking and the students responding nonverbally. Later on, the students become more verbal and the teacher responds nonverbally. Students perform the actions together. Students can learn by watching each other.

At some point, however, Asher believes observers must demonstrate their understanding of the commands in order to retain them. As students begin to speak, they issue commands to one another as well as to the teacher.

How are the feelings of the students dealt with?

One of the main reasons TPR was developed was to reduce the stress people feel when studying other languages. One of the primary ways is to allow learners to speak when they are ready. Forcing them to speak before then will only create anxiety. Also, when students do begin to speak, perfection should not be expected.

Another way to relieve anxiety is to make language learning as enjoyable as possible. The use of zany commands and humorous skits are two ways of showing that language learning can be fun.

Finally, it is important that there not be too much modeling, but that students not be too rushed either. Feelings of success and low anxiety facilitate learning.

How is the language viewed? How is culture viewed?

Just as with the acquisition of the native language, the oral modality is primary. Culture is the lifestyle of people who speak the language natively.

What areas of language are emphasized? What language skills are emphasized?

Vocabulary and grammatical structures are emphasized over other language areas. These are embedded within imperatives. The imperatives are single words and multi-word chunks. One reason for the use of imperatives is their frequency of occurrence in the speech directed at young children learning their native language. Understanding the spoken word should precede its production. The spoken language is emphasized over written language. Students often do not learn to read the commands they have already learned to perform until after 10 hours of instruction.

What is the role of the students' native language?

TPR is usually introduced in the students' native language. After the introduction, rarely would the native language be used. Meaning is made clear through body movements.

How is evaluation accomplished?

Teachers will know immediately whether or not students understand by observing their students' actions. Formal evaluations can be conducted simply by commanding individual students to perform a series of actions. As students become more advanced, their performance of skits they have created can become the basis for evaluation.

How does the teacher respond to student errors?

It is expected that students will make errors when they first begin speaking. Teachers should be tolerant of them and only correct major errors. Even these should be corrected unobtrusively. As students get more advanced, teachers can 'fine tune'—correct more minor errors.