

Total Physical Response in Teaching ESL to Adults

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Abstract: Total Physical Response, also called TPR, is a teaching approach that stirs the interest of ESL teachers, and not only, a fact that is demonstrated by the plethora of articles and videos that appear in a basic Google search. The following article describes the pros and cons of using TPR in the ESL classroom. The article argues that TPR is a method that should be used both in young learners' classrooms as well as in those of adults, focusing on the benefits of using this method in the adults' classrooms.

Keywords: TPR, teaching methodology, ESL classroom, adult learning, embarrassment.



Total Physical Response, also called TPR, is a teaching approach that stirs the interest of ESL teachers, and not only, a fact that is demonstrated by the plethora of articles and videos that appear in a basic Google search. For example, such an article is “Total Physical Response - TPR” (<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/total-physical-response-tpr>), by Richard Frost, from British Council, Turkey, containing a brief introduction to this specific teaching approach. Frost explains that TPR is a method that resembles the acquisition of one's mother tongue. Thus, the basic way of using it is by uttering language samples that the teacher also demonstrates and by asking the students to do the same, while also practicing the input language sample.

Despite its present-day popularity, TPR is not a new teaching approach, since, in 1966, James J. Asher published an article entitled “The Learning Strategy of the Total Physical Response: A Review”, in which he describes five pilot studies that focused on the achievements in the area of language acquisition of both young and old students. Asher (1966: 84) concludes

The results suggest that dramatic facilitation in learning listening skill for a second language is related to acting out during retention tests. Although acting out during training for children in certain age groups did not seem to be relevant in these experiments, pilot studies strongly indicate that this conclusion may be limited to short-term training which is typically characteristic of experiments.

Thus, at the time, TPR proved to be a successful method of improving listening skills, but the studies needed to continue. Fortunately, the studies have continued and a great majority of them describe TPR as an effective teaching method. For example, Ice Sariyati (2013) conducted a research in order to find out if TPR might be effective in improving the vocabulary of young learners. She concludes as follows:

-Total Physical Response (TPR) method is effective to improve vocabulary mastery of elementary school children, especially for the first grade. It is supported by the posttest result of experiment class that is significantly improved after being given TPR method treatment, different from that of control class after being given conventional method treatment.

-TPR method is very suitable for children's characteristics; as they love moving around and get bored easily if just sit on the chair. Moreover, it is supported by their good response toward TPR method.

-TPR method can motivate the children to be interested in learning English vocabulary, as it is entertaining them. It is proven by their being happy, enthusiastic and laughing much during the learning activity (Sariyati 2013: 62)

Another positive example concerning the beneficial aspect of TPR in teaching English as a Second Language comes from Cicih Nuraeni (2019), whose article entitled "Using Total Physical Response (TPR) Method on Young Learners English Language Teaching" concludes as follows:

After implementing TPR method periodically, they were very enthusiastic, focused, and interactive in the learning activities especially in vocabulary and comprehension. Besides that, the teaching process through Total Physical Response (TPR) method also works well. It is reflected from student's capability in defining vocabulary meanings that are suited to its contexts. Students also can follow teacher's instructions. This can be overviewed from students' interaction in a more active-communicative learning circumstance as they will have a more enjoyable learning experience and could easily get across to learning materials given by the teacher. There are two research findings, first, this TPR method was able to be implemented for students, which categorized as young learner students and the result showed that it was effective. Second, based on the data, it can be inferred that students had increased their vocabulary and comprehension. It was proved by the pre-test and post-test score. (2019: 33)

The list of successful stories in using TPR in the ESL classroom can continue endlessly, but I will offer only a couple more examples. In the article "The Implementation of TPR (Total Physical Response) Method in Teaching English for Early Childhood", Siti Sumihatul Ummah (2017) praises TPR, describing the lessons using words like "enjoyable" and "memorable" and stating that the students were "active" and "interested", which is what every language teacher hopes for. Bernal Numpaque and García Rojas (2011) discuss the benefits of using TPR-Storytelling, defining the method as "fun", "interesting", "meaningful", "entertaining", a low-stress method of learning a language that is similar to that of first language acquisition, to enumerate just a few of their appreciative words. Therefore, TPR seems to be a very effective teaching method.

However, since there is no such thing as a perfect method, there are some possible minuses. For example, Richard Frost explains that:

- Students who are not used to such things might find it embarrassing. This can be the case initially but I have found that if the teacher is prepared to perform the actions, the students feel happier about copying. Also the students are in groups and don't have to perform for the whole class. This pleasure is reserved for the teacher.
- It is only really suitable for beginner levels.
(<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/total-physical-response-tpr>)

Nonetheless, Frost adds that “whilst it is clear that it is far more useful at lower levels because the target language lends itself to such activities I have also used it successfully with Intermediate and Advanced levels.” The secret, he explains, is in adapting the language from level to level. Moreover, Frost advises against using only TPR in the classroom, explaining that the method is a “successful and fun way of changing the dynamics and pace of a lesson used in conjunction with other methods and techniques.” In addition, Sariyati (2013: 62) explains that the “TPR method, however, can cause some students over acting as they are too excited participating in the learning activity.” Thus, classroom management skills are required as well as extremely well organized lessons and activities.

Interestingly enough, the majority of articles and videos focus on young learners, which leads to a question: Does TPR only function in the young learners’ classroom, or could it be also used in the adults’ classroom? The question is absolutely pertinent given the fact that Asher reviewed the method on study groups of both adults and children.

Chien Jiamu (1997) was also preoccupied with teaching ESL to adults, and in his article, “The right methods for adults. On English acquisition/learning”, he analyzed a few methods among which was also TPR. Jiamu’s conclusion concerning TPR in teaching ESL to adults was that it was “found suitable for adult beginners”. (593)

However, I would propose that, just as Richard Frost considers, TPR can be used with more advanced students as well. In addition, adults might benefit a lot more from such a method. Just like any other student, adult learners need to be motivated, since motivation is the driving force of learning. The entertaining, engaging, and fun aspects of TPR create the perfect environment that can foster the growth of motivation. If a young learner needs fun activities, how much more does an adult, whose life is already filled with worries, work, family, and who probably needs to learn English in order to secure a job? One possible counterargument would be the embarrassing aspect of TPR. However, the ESL classroom needs to be a safe space, and it is the teacher’s job to create such a space. Fortunately enough, after some classes, adults tend to become friends, feel familiar enough together and actually enjoy laughing at each other while also learning English. Another possible counterargument might be the lack of seriousness of such a teaching method, since people live with the prejudice that adults must be serious. Nonetheless, adults also need to let out some steam, and using TPR might be just the right tool in doing so.

On a more positive note, a great aspect of TPR is the immediacy of success. This is one key factor to promote TPR activities in ESL adult classrooms. Since adults have a lot on their plate, it becomes fundamental for them to have the feeling of success as soon as possible. Every ESL teacher that has ever worked with adults knows that they tend to be the first to quit, especially if they do not feel that they are advancing, or advancing fast enough. TPR, with its rapid effects, grants adult learners that feeling of success that they crave for.

In conclusion, the use of TPR in adults’ classrooms should not be avoided. On the contrary, TPR might be the answer to the adults’ tendency to quit because of its multiple benefits. Firstly, it offers the “fun” element that should be present in every classroom and that adults sometimes need even more. Secondly, the rapid results of TPR offer adults the necessary motivation to continue their language learning process. Lastly, TPR also ensures a relaxing environment, where learners are free to laugh, make mistakes and grow together.

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Bio

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