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Using Total Physical Response Method in Early Childhood Foreign Language Teaching Environments

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Abstract

Early years of life are the period when emotional, physical, cognitive and language development is very fast. It is the most valuable time to start teaching a foreign language or languages to young children. Although there are various methods and techniques in teaching foreign languages, the most appropriate one for young learners is Total Physical Response (TPR) method. TPR is a method which is built around the coordination of speech and action in other words it is to teach language through activity (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). There are no texts in the teaching environment but there is a teaching via songs, games, stories accompany actions which attracts the attention of young active learners. In this paper, the positive sides of using TPR in foreign language classrooms for young learners are discussed and some sample activities are introduced.

Key Words: Total physical response, young learners, foreign language teaching;

1. Introduction

Early childhood is a precious period when children get their most rapid performance in terms of emotional, physical, cognitive and language development (Crain, 2005). In the process of globalization, knowing foreign languages will be essential in life so it can be practical to teach a foreign language to young learners when they have a potential to learn languages.

Foreign language education in preschool years is vital and there are many studies to show this importance (Crain, 2005; Penfield & Roberts, 1959; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Gürsoy, 2011; Krashen, Sferlazza, Feldman & Fatman, 1976; Krashen, 1982). Krashen and his friends (1976) admit that children are more independent than adults in terms of their manners for learning a foreign language. Learning a foreign language is a crucial issue, but the starting point of learning a foreign or second language is affected by age (Abello-Contesse, 2009).

Critical Period Hypothesis is one of the discussion issues in foreign language learning. It is first put forward by Penfield and Roberts (1959), and they assert that during this critical term which occurs mostly before puberty people acquire their native language and other languages, but if they cannot achieve, this means that they have linguistic problems. When the critical period is finished, it is not easy to be able to learn a foreign language (Johnson and Newport, 1989). According to Gürsoy (2011) language acquisition process must be completed before puberty, for it is suggested that language develop fully until then. Similarly, Bongaerts (2005) claims that, achieving in a native-like pronunciation is not possible if a person starts learning a foreign or second language after puberty. Littlewood (1988) says that there is a period when language learning is conductive until puberty. Children who start younger than 11-12 years of age, with advantageous learning circumstances, are more likely to acquire a foreign language to native levels without an accent (Pinter,2006).

According to Burstall, Jamieson, Cohen and Hargreaves (1974) children do not have a negative attitude towards learning a new language and its rules so they have no barrier in language learning. McDonough (1989) claims that children are best example of language learning and explains this through Chomsky's 'Language Acquisition Device' which exists in human brain that sets free learning. Krashen and Terrel (1983) call 'Language Acquisition Device' as 'Effective Filter Hypothesis' and declare that after puberty, effective filter start working and constrains language learning. This is not viable for young children.

According to Ellis (2008), as foreign language learning styles of an adult and a child are different from each other, it is essential to prepare programs with suitable approaches, methods or techniques for adults and children separately. Although there are several approaches in teaching foreign languages to young learners, four main types of syllabi are discussed for planning and implementing. They are story-based, content-based, theme-based (topic-based) and task-based syllabi. In fact, they are actually quite interrelated. A teacher can use story-telling as a theme (Garvie, 1990) or engage language learners with tasks in a story-based teaching environment, or she may choose a topic which she assigns tasks to learners (Bourke, 2006).Teachers can implement any syllabus as it is or adapt it by

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using various techniques and methods. Total physical response is the one which is widely used in language classrooms in early childhood period.

2.   What is TPR in a young learner classroom?

Total Physical Response is a language teaching method developed by James Asher, a psychology professor at San Jose State University. TPR attempts to teach language through speech and physical activity at the same time. Motor activities are means to language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It is just like the way children acquire their native language (Asher, 1977). Learners' role in TPR is to listen and perform what the teacher says, they monitor and evaluate their own progress. They are encouraged to speak when they feel ready to speak. This is when a sufficient basis in language has been internalized (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Teacher is the model and the director. The teacher provides opportunities for learning. When TPR is integrated into routines, the learners will immediately become involved in the language and engaged in reacting to it. They will soon realise that they understand a lot of things and will build confidence as they learn (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The teacher takes on the role of the parent; giving prompts, setting patterns, playing games, and the student then responds physically to the prompt. In giving feedback the teacher responds positively to the correct answer, much in the way that a parent would. This reinforces the learning and encourages further steps. Although TPR is a powerful technique, it is most effective when it is followed by games, songs, stories or demonstrations.

3.   Why TPR for young learners?

3.1   Appeals to a number of learning styles

Young learners need to move, they have got huge amount of energy. They tend to have short attention spans. Children are very much linked to their surroundings and are more interested in the physical and the tangible. According to Scott and Ytreberg (1990), children's own understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears and their physical world is dominant at all times. When TPR activities are games, it is suitable for kinaesthetic learners who learn best through physically doing something or connecting to memory through actions. Besides kinesthetic learners, TPR appeals to visual children who take visual cues from seeing the actions associated with the instructions given. When TPR is followed by songs, auditory learners will particularly benefit from the songs in which the words and rhythms associated with movement which will be memorable to them (Reilly and Ward, 1997).

3.2. Text independent

There is no basic text in a TPR course. For the beginning stage, lessons may not require the use of materials, since the teacher's voice, actions, and gestures may be a sufficient basis for classroom activities. The teacher can use common classroom objects such as books, toys, puppets, furniture etc. (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). As very young children are under 7, who do not know how to read and write, it is inevitable to prepare them activities which are applied without using a pencil and paper. Activities are mostly applied orally or pictures can be used. The child can point to the picture when a certain word is uttered. When a story is read by the teacher, the child can mime the actions (Pinter, 2006).

3.3. Enjoyable, fun, interesting

Although TPR does not put the learner under stress, it is not for young learners as they do not have the feeling of anxiety while learning. As the language classroom is full of movement, songs and movement or stories and movement, they always have fun and they can always keep their interest in the process (Mirici, 1999).

3.4. Bilateral

There are two main features of TPR (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Firstly, it is known that language activities are carried out in the left brain, and physical actions are coordinated by the right brain. Using TPR in language teaching helps children work both parts of the brain (Asher, 1977). Secondly, while learning a language, children focus on movements, so they acquire the language unconsciously, which reduce stress of learning a language just like Krashen (1982) mentions as Affective Filter Hypothesis.

4.   TPR Activities for Young Learners

TPR can easily be used in a everyday classroom routine. The teacher encourages the children to recognise and respond to simple classroom instructions and gestures, such as; hands up, stand up, sit down, wave goodbye etc. She can make visual associations with words that the children can learn and mimic, especially descriptive words. For example: big, happy, small, sad. It should be kept in mind that they love to mime professions, animals, vehicles, weather conditions etc. In such activities children first listen and then understand messages, decide whether they are right or wrong, and finally act accordingly (Pinter,2006).

Games are the most important component in teaching young learners. They like active games. A popular game is *Simon Says* which can be adapted to body words, action words and objects students can touch. Charades is miming and guessing words using picture or word cards. These games are easy to apply in a language classroom. The learners have enough space to mime (Reilly and Ward, 1997). Songs are also precious while dealing with young learners. When songs accompany actions in a foreign language classroom they will build up TPR element and make children understand the meaning of the songs better. It is useful to choose simple repetitive songs which promote understanding and memorability. Memorable song tunes help enormously in creating mental links to words and meaning. The songs can be about face vocabulary. You would teach them the actions first, introducing the parts of the face by saying and demonstrating "Point to your nose, show me your ears, etc.''.You would then play the song and encourage the children to do the actions. Repetition of songs and actions is very important for young learners as familiarity brings confidence and will help them remember (Reilly and Ward, 1997).

Storytelling is the most authentic and popular activity for all children. Children will pick up the new language easily because stories contain repetition that makes linguistic input more noticeable (Pinter, 2006). In a TPR storytelling activity, children may mime

the story as it is told, perform pre-arranged actions when they hear key words read out, listen and stand up when a character speaks or acts, look and point to key illustrations of the story. These actions will make the story come to life and help the children internalise the language.

Action stories help children feel that they understand language from the very beginning. It is listening, watching and imitating. The children gradually understand the language in a holistic way. First, key words are introduced may be through pictures. The words are repeated slowly by the teacher several times and in an order (plane, dog..) The students get these words. The important thing is to adapt teaching pace to students' pace of learning. Then the sentences are introduced gradually and one after the other (fly the plane, hug the dog…). The teacher repeats the previous sentence before introducing the new one. She keeps the order that the sentences are presented in. Then she jumbles the order of the sentences and while uttering them she expects the students to mime these sentences. Lastly, pictures of the repeated words and sentences are given to the students. The students are asked to write the number of the told action near the picture.

5. Conclusion

Foreign language teaching to young learners is a rapidly growing field all over the world. Very young age in acquiring a language is an advantage unless the presentation is done accordingly. Language development is fast in early years and for the beginning level in a foreign language teaching, TPR is a suitable technique which is built around the coordination of speech and action. It is to teach language through activity (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Young learners do not know reading and writing yet so they learn through activities, songs, stories and games mostly. There are no texts so the classroom objects can be used easily. The class is full of actions which appeals to those kinesthetic learners. TPR activities will ensure that young learners can hear the new vocabulary in a meaningful context and respond nonverbally first (Pinter, 2006). When these are considered cumulatively TPR is said to be the most effective technique which can be used in foreign language classrooms for young learners.

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