



Activate Your Robot: Enhancing TPR Through Situated Role-Play

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Total Physical Response (TPR) is based on the notion that learning a new language can be strengthened by linking phrases and sentences to physical movement. Simply put, the approach consists of “Do what I say” activities. Typically, the teacher gives a command (e.g., *Pick up a red block.*) and student(s) follow it. TPR is often seen as an engaging and effective approach whereby learners can demonstrate comprehension of the target language long before they are comfortable producing it. TPR commands are also present in the ordinary teacher talk found in any classroom lesson. For example, *open your books to page 33* and *please turn in your papers* are essentially TPR commands. Thus, students are inherently familiar with the form and often need to respond to it.

As engaging and practical as TPR activities can be, many teachers have noted that TPR routines quickly become boring and repetitive, that they are difficult to utilize beyond the beginning level, and that it is sometimes difficult to help students transition from passive listen-and-respond routines to active production of the target language, especially with larger classes. I have found that these challenges can be addressed by making two adjustments in typical TPR routines—using situated role-plays and creating an optional scaffold for target language output.

Role play has long been seen as beneficial in terms of bridging the gap between classroom practice and real world use of the target language. It allows learners to “step outside themselves” and, therefore, feel less self-conscious about their language use. At the same time, many real life contexts, from beginning level to advanced, involve giving and/or responding to commands. I have found that by designing role plays based on such real world routines and providing a scaffold to encourage (but not require) students to participate in giving TPR commands, I can also help them become aware of an extra sense of purpose in their physical responses to TPR commands. Here I describe an example of this type of TPR lesson for beginners, using a role-play featuring robots.

Step 1: Activating Background Knowledge

Assemble posters, pictures, or electronic images featuring famous (or not so famous) robots from films, TV, comic books, or other sources. I use R2D2 and C3P0 from *Star Wars* as they are instantly recognizable and their names are easy to use as models when I want my students to name their own robots (see Step 2 below). Display the pictures so all students can see them or hand them out for students to pass around. Ask students some questions such as *What do you know about robots? What are some other famous robots?*

Give volunteers a chance to tell about robots they have seen or heard about. Finally, tell them that today everyone in the class will be a robot.

Step 2: Naming the Robots

Explain that the first thing they must do is to choose a robot name. Demonstrate by figuring out your own robot name. Although any naming convention can work, I usually use the R2D2 and C3P0 model of letter-number-letter-number by choosing my initials as the letters and the number of letters in each name as the numbers; for example, my name—*Matt Schaefer*—becomes M4S8. Hand out name tag stickers to each student for them to write their robot names on, and ask them to wear the tags somewhere easily visible.

Step 3: Activating the Robots

Explain to students that robots must do whatever they are told and that currently you are the head robot, so they must do what you say. Then, begin issuing commands. These can start very simply with, for example, *All robots: Stand up*. Then continue with whatever level of language is appropriate for the class. Among the commands that I typically use at the beginning level are: *Stand up*, *Sit down*, *Turn around*, and *Raise your right/left hand*. Soon, however, I direct my robots to become a bit more active by commanding them to:

- *Play the guitar, piano, or violin.*
- *Play volleyball, soccer, or baseball.*
- *Eat a hamburger, pizza, or sandwich.*
- *Drink a cup of tea, milkshake, or glass of water.*
- *Cook spaghetti, barbecue a steak, or make a sandwich.*

After giving several commands to the whole class, choose some individual robots to order around using their name tags to call them out. For example, *N6H5, play the piano*. This is an opportunity to use stronger students to model for weaker ones. After being head robot for a while, ask whether any other robots want to be the head robot. Often there will be several volunteers. This shows that some students are ready for production.

Step 4: Programming the Robots

Next, or in a subsequent lesson, put students into pairs, seated, ideally, so that partners are facing each other. Ask them to take out a clean sheet of paper. At the top, they write *Commands for...* followed by the robot name of their partner. Then have them number their paper from 1 to 10 and write ten commands for their partner. Monitor the class while they do this, providing support and language input as necessary. Students can use vocabulary they have already seen or heard in previous lessons, refer to their textbooks, or try to come up with something they have never tried saying in English before. This step can be continued as homework, if necessary.

Step 5: Training the Robots

Finally, when everyone is ready, students take turns giving commands to their partners. If some students are still not comfortable with speaking at this point, they can give their list of commands to another robot who will command their partner robot. What ensues looks and sounds like chaos, but it will also entail a lot of meaningful language practice.

Step 6: Reactivating the Robots

Once the students have created and used their robots, the role play can be used again in subsequent lessons to introduce new phrases and expressions as well as to revise previously taught ones. The possibilities are limitless. Simply announce *Let's play robots*, and the students will know what to do.

Caveats

- If possible, make your robot name tags from sturdy card stock or other reusable paper or plastic, so that they are durable and easy to find when you want to use them later.
- One easy way to revise but also extend previously used commands is to add adverbials or negation, for example: *Cook spaghetti slowly. Turn around three times, or Don't smile.*
- Sometimes I teach students who find it easier to take in new language through print rather than through listening. For groups like this, I usually write their first commands on the board while they are making their name tags in Step 2. In subsequent lessons, they are usually willing to listen and speak directly without depending on reading.
- Some students may produce commands that stretch the use of the imperative. For example, they may say, *Be ten years old* or *Live in America*. However, I have found that their partners nearly always find an appropriate and creative way to respond such commands.

I have found the following TPR role play situations work well with students at an intermediate or advanced level of proficiency.

Developing skills

Playing a musical instrument, trying a new computer game, learning to use a gadget, and getting from Point A to Point B for the first time all involve responding to imperatives. Your students can demonstrate use of this kind of language by role playing a driving lesson. Have them turn your classroom into a town using desks as city blocks. Then, working in pairs, a driving instructor gives a student driver commands such as: *Go straight ahead, turn right at the first corner, turn left at the second light, stop here, park the car,*

and watch out, don't hit that car! Afterward, have students work in small groups to teach each other skills that they know how to perform using their own musical instruments, gadgets, games, and so forth.

On the job training

Many high school students and young adults have part-time jobs. Learning what to do in the workplace often requires following many directions. Create a training session for newly hired servers in a restaurant. The maitre d' or head waiter gives directions to the new hires who, in turn, performing actions (and speak) with diners. Example commands could include: *When they finish the soup, take away their bowls. Don't forget to mention the specials. Ask them if they would like dessert.* Encourage students to show each other about their real part-time jobs by creating additional roles plays in which they play the role of trainer.

Acting—the ultimate role play

Acting is all about role play. Have students work in small groups to create a movie rehearsal scene in which a director coaches actors who are just learning their roles. Challenge them linguistically and creatively by using an example similar to this one: *Slowly tip-toe towards the desk. Show both excitement and fear on your face. Pick up the knife and slowly turn it over in your hand. Think about what you will do with it when you see the man who betrayed you. Now, as the door opens, let your jaw drop and your eyes widen in surprise...*

Conclusion

TPR activities become more meaningful when applied not just to classroom situations, but also to authentic contexts in which giving commands naturally occurs. This increases the level of engagement, interest, and motivation and creates the opportunity to expose students to a much wider range of vocabulary and structures. The teacher can also easily set the balance between input and output based on individual classes and individual students within those classes, creating a non-threatening, enjoyable environment that allows learners to experiment, play, and have fun with the target language.

About the Author

Matthew Schaefer is an assistant English teacher in Nagoya, Japan where he is also working on his M.A. in TESOL at the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. Prior to settling in Japan, he taught English in France, Spain, Italy, and England. He has studied film, music, and literature and enjoys using these subjects to activate his English language students.