

Intermediate TPR: What Do You Do After They Stand Up?

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Whoever follows the way of life feels alive,
whoever uses it properly feels well used.

—Lao Tzu

Many teachers regard Total Physical Response (TPR) or learning through actions as a technique best suited for children or beginning language students. This is understandable because the type of language used in TPR is frequently the type used when talking to children. As Asher noted:

Utterances, usually commands from adults, are used to manipulate the orientation, relation, and locomotion of the child's entire body. This phenomenon can be observed in a massive number of commands as:

"Come here!"

"Stand still!"

"Don't make a fist when I'm trying to put on your coat!"

"Pick up the red truck and put it in the toy box in your room!" (1982:3).

This article will look at TPR from the point of view of a classroom teacher. It will consider both the strong and weak points of this technique and then consider a slightly different application suitable for high beginners or low intermediate students.

Advantages of TPR

Perhaps the single most impressive feature of TPR is its simplicity. There are no charts to learn, no pedagogical training to master, no linguistic theory to comprehend. One person, usually the teacher, tells another

person or persons, usually students, to perform an action while at the same time performing that action himself. Later it becomes possible for the teacher to give commands without performing the action himself. With a little practice, students are able to understand and perform long and sometimes complicated sentence-commands. From the student's point of view, TPR can be summarized as you see, you hear and you act.

Another point to consider is communication. Since the 1970's we have been increasingly aware of the need to incorporate communication into our teaching. Indeed, it has come to the point that an instructional methodology that does not include communicative competence is not judged as adequate. At least three points can be made relative to TPR and communication.

1. TPR emphasizes communication in the natural spoken voice. In the sentence-command, "Go to the door" students listen for the *what* and the *where* of the sentence. It is not necessary to catch or to understand the preposition "to" or to engage in lengthy discussion on the difference between the use of "a door" and "the door".

2. Register and levels of politeness, considered important in a spoken language, can be introduced in the classroom because the command form can take several forms. Consider this one command:

Mary, go to the door.

Mary, could you go to the door.

Mary, can you go to the door, please.

Mary, if it's not too much trouble, could you go to the door.

3. It is possible to give the command in a natural spoken English which can include the natural contractions and reductions of spoken language. In other words, you-don't-have-to-speak-like-this.

A final comment on the merits of TPR should include its flexibility. Actions that may or may not include speaking can be used to begin a class or may be used as short transitions from one activity to another. These include actions while sitting, pointing to objects, actions while sitting in a crowded classroom, moving things on a desk and learning simple classroom procedures in the target language. For more details see my article in the special TPR issue of *The Language Teacher* (Griffiee 1985).

Drawbacks of TPR

But all that glitters is not gold and TPR has its problems points too. From the point of view of a classroom teacher, here are three of them.

1. TPR is very demanding on the teacher. TPR is energy intensive and hard on the voice. One class using TPR might be OK, but a series of TPR class drain energy from the teacher to an unacceptable degree and most teachers teach many classes.

2. There is a tendency to run out of commands. There are few natural props in a traditional classroom and there are a limited number of commands that involve doors and windows. This is not to say that a clever teacher can not invent many, perhaps an almost infinite series of commands from a limited number of objects, but most of us are not that clever.

3. Another problem is that there is no real reason for any of the actions. In this

sense, TPR is somewhat like a drill. Although unlikely, this dialogue is possible:

Teacher: Go to the door.

Student: Why?

If the above dialogue were to take place, what could the teacher say?

A "Mini-drama" Solution

These problems forced me to take another look at how I was using TPR in my classroom (Griffiee 1981) and the remainder of this article deals with my solution which I call mini-dramas.

Drama gives a reason for the TPR actions in that drama contains a story and stories have meaning. To see how this might work, let's examine the construct of a mini-drama and the commands which accompany it and then see how they might be applied in a classroom.

An Example

Since many students in Asia are familiar with public means of transportation such as a bus, taking a bus to the post office can be the subject of a mini-drama.

1. Passenger, go to the bus stop. **Look at the schedule.** Look at your watch. Wait for the bus. Here comes a bus. **Wave at the bus driver.**
2. Driver, stop the bus and open the door.
3. Passenger, ask the driver, "Do you go by the post office?"
4. Driver, say, "Yes."
5. Passenger, get on the bus, **hold a strap, and look around for a seat.** Stand there for a minute. Find a seat. **Sit down.**

6. Driver, drive the bus. Now, say, "Next stop, post office."
7. Passenger, push the button.
8. Driver, stop the bus in front of the post office.
9. Passenger, stand up, walk to the front of the bus, and put some money in the box next to the driver. Now get off the bus. Walk to the post office. Try to open the door. You can't open the door. Look at the sign on the door. The sign says "Closed on Sundays and Holidays." Put your hand on your forehead and say, "Oh, no. Today is Sunday." (Griffiee 1982:12)

From this mini-drama, TPR commands can be derived as seen below.

Point to a watch.
 Point to the door.
 Point to your hand.
 Point to your forehead.
 Put your hand on your forehead.

Open your hand.
 Close your hands.
 Wave your hand.

Look around.
 Look at the chair.
 Go to the chair.
 Sit down on the chair.

Point to the calendar.
 Go to the calendar and point to "today".
 Now point to Sunday.
 Now point to a holiday.

Walk to the calendar.
 Find a holiday and point to it.
 Find a Sunday and point to it.

Find today and point to it.
 Walk around the classroom.
 Find an empty chair and sit down.

Here's a pencil.
 Take a pencil.
 Put the pencil in the box.

We have examined a mini-drama and some of the commands which might be derived from it. It is important to note that the mini-drama was written first. In other words, the mini-drama provides a context for the commands thus dealing with problem two of a tendency to not be clear why you are giving the commands and problem three of giving a reason for the commands. The effect of listening to the commands and acting is to prepare students for the drama. They are prepared for the language of the mini-drama by the active listening and they are prepared for the action of the mini-drama by the movement required by the commands. Students require a warm up the same as athletes do.

Plan for Teaching

One possible teaching plan might be as follows:

1. The teacher reads the TPR commands being careful to demonstrate every action at least the first time a new action is introduced. Students have to see the action as well as hear the language to grasp the meaning.
2. The teacher and students read the mini-drama.
3. The teacher divides the class into groups of three. One student is assigned to be the passenger, another the driver and another the reader. Only the reader has a copy of the mini-drama. The purpose of the reader is to be the director and also a kind of mini-teacher. The students who are acting

perform all actions and say the lines assigned to their part. By reading the lines to the other two actors the assignment is made much easier as nothing has to be memorized.

4. Roles can be exchanged and the mini-drama performed again. The student who is the passenger becomes the reader, etc.

The role of the teacher at this stage is to move around the room, watch and encourage. The students, for their part, will be engrossed in the activity. Thus we have dealt with problem one, the exhausting energy drain, as well as provided the students with an opportunity for controlled group work.

Summary

A mini-drama can be looked upon as an extension of TPR. It reduces the demand on the teacher by spreading it among the students, it provides a source of possible commands and gives a reason for the commands by providing a context of meaning. There is something about putting language learning in a context of physical action and meaning that creates life and enthusiasm. Or to paraphrase Lao Tzu, if you honor life, life will honor you.

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