

Children Learning English as a Foreign Language

Total Physical Response in Pre-primary Language Learning

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Total physical response (TPR) is probably something that all good teachers use in the pre-primary classroom, but do you ever stop to think about what really happens when you use it?

■ What is TPR?

Sorry for another acronym. *TPR* simply means *total physical response*. This was a term coined by Dr. James Asher at San Jose State University in 1965. He showed how students can learn a language by listening to and carrying out instructions.

Asher's theory is that languages can be more easily learnt if we look at how infants learn their first language. Before being able to speak, a baby reacts physically to language and then moves to verbal expression. During the pre-speech period, the baby internalises the language.

The use of TPR in the classroom in many ways tries to take advantage of this ready-made learning capacity that everyone has. In a way, the teacher takes on the role of the parent — giving prompts, setting patterns, playing games, and the student then responds physically to the prompt. The teacher then responds positively to the correct response, much in the way that a parent would. This reinforces the learning and encourages further steps.



TPR also recognises a “silent period” during which the learner is absorbing the new language and cannot yet produce new words with confidence.

Whether you have heard the term TPR or not, almost all pre-primary teachers have likely used it instinctively.

■ Why is TPR particularly useful for young learners?

TPR techniques can be used with adults in many ways, but they really lend themselves to teaching young learners because of children's:

- need to move
- lack of inhibition in moving in front of others
- natural desire to mimic
- innate desire to react
- enjoyment of tactile activities
- Huge amounts of energy

From the moment you wave and say “Hello” and they respond in kind, TPR is kicking in. From that point on, you might instruct the children to move to different places in the classroom, use a puppet to animate meaning and shake hands with the children, play a game involving actions, ask the children to touch or point to things in a book, or you sing a song with actions. All of these activities incorporate TPR.

TPR appeals to a number of learning styles. It most obviously appeals to the kinaesthetic learner who learns best through physically doing something or connecting to memory through actions.

However, visual learners will take visual cues from seeing the actions associated with the instructions given.

Auditory learners will particularly benefit from TPR chants and songs in which the words and rhythms associated with movement will be memorable to them.

However, to me the most important thing is that TPR brings language to life and makes language learning an enjoyable experience.



■ Text and TPR

One of the greatest advantages of TPR for the pre-primary classroom is that it doesn't have to be text dependent. TPR can be mostly oral. This means that children of any level of reading ability can react to it — creating the perfect type of activity for mixed ability classes. The ability to respond physically to a prompt can be particularly rewarding for children who have dyslexia and other learning issues.

However, as you move to higher levels. TPR can be used with pictures and then text. Children can point to different words, match them, do actions when a certain word is read aloud in a story, or mime actions as they read.

■ TPR and everyday classroom activities

You can easily use TPR in your everyday classroom routine. Get the children used to responding to greetings and questions like: *How are you?* by doing a thumbs up or down.

Encourage the children to recognise and respond to your simple classroom instructions and gestures to do things like:

- touch
- stand up
- sit down
- hands up/down
- find
- open/close your books

Make visual associations with words that they can learn and mimic, especially descriptive words:

- big
- small
- happy
- sad

And of course, they love to mime people, animals, vehicles, weather... (you can probably think of many more.)



By integrating TPR into routines, students 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.

■ TPR Games

Young learners like active games. You can draw on well-known games that involve

TPR. Don't be afraid of adapting them to suit your needs. Particularly useful games are:

- *Simon Says* — can be adapted to body words, action words and objects students can touch (or not touch)
- Chain games building on actions with each progressive child
- *Charades* — miming and guessing words using picture or word cards

My Little Island incorporates the development of learning through TPR. In it, you will find many suggestions for TPR games and activities to play in the classroom that are associated with the new language in each unit.

■ TPR songs

With a little imagination, you can turn elements of most children's songs into action songs and build up the TPR element. It is important that the children understand the meaning of the songs. It is also useful to choose simple repetitive songs so that they can anticipate the structure and participate more fully. Memorable song tunes help enormously in creating mental links to words and meaning. Children will remember a song they like for a long time.

Most songs in *My Little Island* have been written as TPR songs, with actions embedded to promote understanding and memorability. For example, the song "Close Your Eyes" (see page 4) mixes actions with face vocabulary. You would teach them the actions first, introducing the parts of the face by saying and demonstrating "Point to your...". 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 breeds confidence and will help them remember. Read/listen and imagine the children acting out this song: [Click here to play the song.](#)

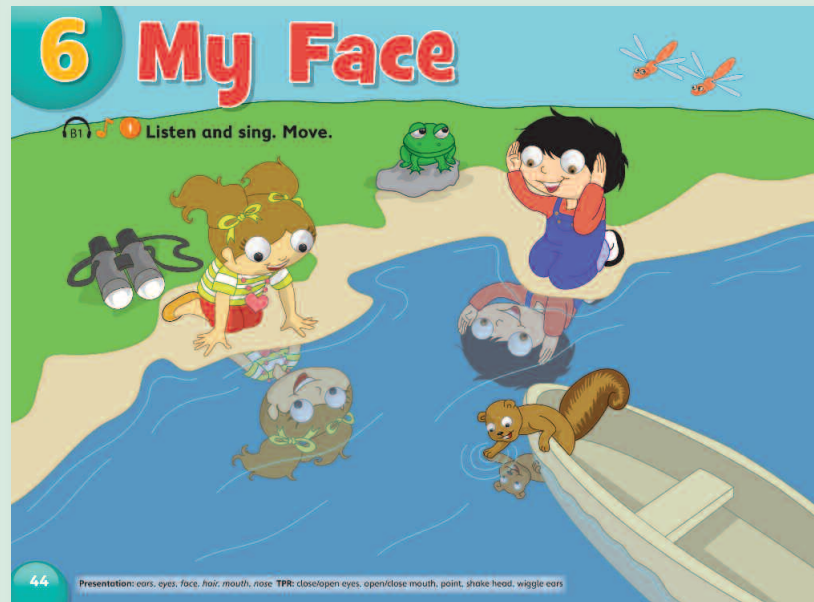
■ TPR stories

Children can participate in stories using TPR with a few simple techniques. They can:

Close your eyes
Open your eyes
Open your mouth
Close your mouth

Point to your nose
Wiggle your ears
Point to your nose
Wiggle your ears

Shake your head
and move your hair
Shake your head
and move your hair



- mime the story as it is read/played on an audio device
- 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/frames of the story

These actions will make the story come to life and help the children internalise the language.

■ TPR as part of many techniques

TPR is one of many teaching techniques appropriate for young learners. You will invariably find that a number of different techniques work better with different children/groups. The great advantage of TPR is its accessibility, liveliness and attractiveness to the learner. TPR is particularly suited to the young learner who is beginning a new language; however, it can be used for older learners and even adults.

TPR is something that both teachers and learners enjoy.