

Application of Total Physical Response Teaching Method in English Teaching for Children

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Abstract: This article aims to explore the application of the Total Physical Response (TPR) teaching method in young children's English teaching. Through literature review and empirical research, we found that the TPR teaching method can effectively promote children's interest and enthusiasm in English learning, and improve their language comprehension and expression ability. This article introduces the theoretical basis, implementation steps, and specific application of the TPR teaching method in children's English teaching in detail, and proves its effectiveness through teaching experience. Finally, we put forward the direction and prospects of future research.

Keywords: TPR teaching method; Children English teaching; Application exploration; Empirical research; Language ability development

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1. Total Physical Response teaching method

Total Physical Response (TPR) teaching method is also known as the "pure experiential language learning method." This teaching method was proposed by Dr. James Asher, a well-known American experimental psychologist, in the 1960s. It emphasizes the interactive model of language learning, develops students' comprehension skills through full-body movements, and allows students to speak after they are ready. This makes the TPR teaching method popular in early childhood English teaching ^[1].

2. Theoretical basis of the TPR teaching method

2.1. Language learning theory

The TPR teaching method is based on the mode of children acquiring their native language. Its second language acquisition theory mainly includes the following two aspects:

2.1.1. The order of second language acquisition

The ability to understand spoken language preceded speaking. As early as the 1960s, Asher found that

understanding is the most basic skill before speaking. Child psychologists Gesse and Thompson observed that before babies speak, they have already been able to understand rather complex content. Once they have mastered the complex laws of language operation and gained proficient oral language skills, the physiological mechanism of language acquisition will not disappear, and they will actively speak a lot of words.

2.1.2. The way of second language acquisition

The TPR imitates the process of children's first language acquisition: Before babies say "Mommy and Daddy" or even utter the first sound, language is accompanied by physical movements that leave marks. Swiss psychologist Piaget called this language acquisition process "constructing facts." He believed that children must experience things in order to construct facts. Therefore, "students' understanding of oral language should be achieved by doing actions with their bodies. The TPR is the key to developing students' comprehension skills." In the TPR classroom, teachers teach actions such as "touch your nose," "give me a hug," "jump," "run," and so on. The main purpose is to help students understand these actions through physical movements. However, Asher believed that compared with babies acquiring their native language, when children and adults acquire second languages through imitating the instruction-action mode, they can more quickly understand imperative sentences. The reason is that babies' action responses are limited to a few behaviors: looking, touching, grasping, pointing, and eating ^[2].

2.2. Left-right brain division theory

The theory of the division of labor of the left and right brains in second language acquisition among young children is mainly based on the different functions and characteristics of the left and right hemispheres of the brain. The left brain is mainly responsible for language and logical thinking, while the right brain is responsible for imagery thinking and spatial perception. Therefore, under normal circumstances, young children acquire second languages through gestures and physical action aided by the right brain. It is a kind of understanding and habit that develops from intuitive to abstract.

2.3. "Memory trace" theory in psychology

The TPR teaching method is related to the "memory trace" theory in psychology. This theory believes that the more frequently and strongly one rehearses memories, the stronger the memory association will be, and the more likely it will be recalled ^[3]. The combination of written practice and physical activities in retrieval activities can help to increase the likelihood of memory recall ^[4].

2.4. Affective psychology theory

TPR has absorbed the role of humanistic psychology in the teaching of emotions. In this teaching method, the teacher will not correct the mistakes of students but encourage them to speak boldly. It is believed that good teacher-student emotional communication can create a positive classroom atmosphere and reduce student anxiety.

3. Basic teaching implementation steps of the TPR teaching method

The TPR teaching method is a language teaching method that focuses on teaching language through physical actions. The whole body response method is an integrated teaching approach that incorporates "games,

performances, painting, pictures” and more. It advocates reducing children’s anxiety and creating a relaxed and enjoyable learning atmosphere for them, thereby relaxing children’s emotions and improving learning efficiency ^[5]. **Table 1** shows the specific implementation steps of TPR teaching method.

Table 1. The specific implementation steps of TPR teaching method

Teaching step	Teacher activities	Student activities
Presentation phase	Model the action while speaking	Listen and watch
Imitation phase	Repeat the instruction while demonstrating the action	Silent phase Imitate the teacher’s actions Language input
Practice phase	Speak the instructions	Perform the actions
Role-reversal phase	Perform the actions according to the students’ instructions	Provide instructions (individuals) and perform actions (others) Language output

4. Specific application of TPR teaching method in English teaching for young children

4.1. Integration of TPR teaching and animal word teaching

For children’s word teaching, TPR teaching method can help children learn in games and improve their learning interest and memory effect. For example, animal word teaching:

4.1.1. Warm-up activities

Teachers lead children to do animal imitation exercises, such as imitating dog barking, cat scratching, bird flying, etc. This activity can stimulate children’s interest and give them a visual impression of animals.

4.1.2. Presentation of words

The teacher shows the animal words on the card, such as “dog,” “cat,” “bird,” “tiger,” “duck,” “lion,” etc., and makes corresponding animal imitation actions. For example, when talking about “dog,” the teacher mimics the dog’s barking and tail wagging movements; when talking about “cat,” mimics the cat’s scratching and washing actions; when talking about “bird,” mimics the bird’s flying and singing actions ^[6].

4.1.3. TPR instruction

The teacher gives instructions for the children to imitate and make corresponding animal movements. For example, the teacher says, “I am a big lion, and now I am going to eat a small rabbit. Please make the rabbit jump action.” After hearing the instructions, the children imitate the rabbit jump action.

4.1.4. Word review

The teacher changes the order of the animal words on the cards and asks the children to make corresponding animal movements based on the instructions. For example, the teacher randomly picks up a card and says, “Please make the corresponding movement for tiger.” The children imitate the movements of a tiger’s roar and walking.

4.1.5. Ending the activity

The teacher leads the children to sing a children’s song about animals together, such as “Twinkle, Twinkle,

Little Star,” and the lyrics replace it with the name of an animal. For example, “Twinkle, twinkle, little star, little cat, little cat, winking eye.” Through the integration of TPR teaching and vocabulary teaching for young children, children can learn and remember animal words through games, enhancing their learning interest and memory. At the same time, this teaching method can also help children establish a connection between language and action, promoting their cognitive development.

4.2. Integration of TPR teaching and song teaching

An example of integrating TPR teaching with the song lesson of “The Wheels on the Bus”:

4.2.1. Warm-up activities

The teacher plays the melody of “The Wheels on the Bus” and leads the children to do simple body swaying and hand clapping movements.

4.2.2. Presentation of lyrics

The teacher displays the lyrics sentence by sentence and performs corresponding TPR actions. For example, when the lyrics are sung to “The wheels on the bus go round and round,” the teacher makes a motion of rotating the wrist to simulate the rotation of the wheels; when the lyrics are sung to “The doors on the bus go open and shut,” the teacher makes a motion of opening and closing the palm to simulate the opening and closing of the doors; when the lyrics are sung to “The signals on the bus go blink, blink, blink,” the teacher makes a motion of flashing the palm with a signal light ^[7].

4.2.3. TPR instruction

The teacher says a certain sentence in the lyrics and asks the child to imitate the corresponding TPR action. For example, the teacher says, “Please make the corresponding action to ‘The wipers on the bus go swish, swish, swish.’” After hearing the instructions, the child imitates the action of wiping the windshield.

4.2.4. Roleplay

The teacher invites several children to play different roles on the bus, such as the driver, passengers, babies, parents, etc. Other children imitate the actions in the lyrics and provide feedback on the physical reactions of the role players. This can increase the fun of the activity and improve children’s understanding and memory of the lyrics ^[8].

4.2.5. Ending the activity

The teacher and the children sing songs while doing TPR movements, ending the activity in a happy atmosphere.

Through the integration of TPR teaching and the teaching of the children’s song “The Wheels on the Bus,” young children can learn verb phrases and action expressions in a lively song. The addition of TPR movements makes abstract language information concrete and visual, which helps to improve young children’s language perception and expression skills. At the same time, this teaching method also stimulates children’s learning interests and creativity, making them more actively participate in the learning process ^[9].

4.3. Integration of TPR teaching and picture book teaching

An example of integrating TPR teaching with the picture book “Guess How Much I Love You”:

4.3.1. Warm-up activities

The teacher plays soft music and leads the children to do simple body swaying and stretching movements, creating a warm atmosphere for learning the picture book.

4.3.2. Presentation of the picture book

The teacher shows the cover of the picture book “Guess How Much I Love You” and introduces the protagonist and theme of the story to the children. Then, the teacher flips through the picture book page by page, allowing the children to observe the images and use TPR actions to make simple explanations based on the content of the pictures. For example, when the image shows a rabbit jumping, the teacher mimics the rabbit’s jumping action; when it shows a rabbit making a heart with its hands, the teacher also mimics the heart action ^[10].

4.3.3. TPR instruction

The teacher selects a passage from the picture book, reads the text, and uses TPR actions to explain and demonstrate. Then, the teacher gives instructions for the children to imitate the corresponding TPR actions. For example, when the teacher reads “I love you right up to the moon,” the teacher mimics raising their hand to the top of their head to indicate “up to the moon”; then when they read “and back again,” the teacher makes a circular motion with their arms to indicate “back again.” The children imitate the corresponding actions according to the teacher’s instructions.

4.3.4. Roleplay

The teacher invites several children to play the role of the rabbit and the big rabbit, while other children imitate the actions in the picture book and provide feedback on the physical reactions of the role players. This can increase the fun of the activity and improve children’s understanding and memory of the content of the picture book.

4.3.5. Ending the activity

The teacher read the text in the picture book with the children while doing TPR actions. Finally, the teacher encouraged the children to share the learned expressions of love with their families, extending the emotions in the picture book to real life.

Through the integration of TPR teaching and the teaching of the picture book “Guess How Much I Love You,” children can not only understand the storyline and emotional expression in the picture book, but also deepen their understanding and memory of the meaning of the text through TPR actions. At the same time, this teaching method also promotes the development of children’s language perception and expression ability, allowing them to experience the joy of reading in games ^[11].

4.4. Integration of TPR teaching and drawing teaching

An Example of Integrating TPR Teaching with the Drawing Lesson of “My Body” Self-Portrait:

4.4.1. Preparation

- (1) Drawing paper, paintbrushes, paints, and other materials are prepared to ensure that children can create freely and safely.
- (2) The teacher leads the children in body stretch and touch games, such as “touch your nose” and “pat your knee,” to familiarize them with their body parts.

4.4.2. Teaching activities

- (1) Guiding creation: The teacher encourages the children to describe their physical features, such as “I have short hair” or “I have big eyes,” and use their imagination and add personalized elements to their self-portraits.
- (2) TPR demonstration: The teacher uses TPR teaching methods to demonstrate based on the children’s descriptions. For example, when a child says “I have short hair,” the teacher imitates the action of cutting hair. When a child says “I have big eyes,” the teacher uses both hands to mime the size of the eyes. This helps the children translate verbal information into visual images through movement imitation.
- (3) Creative practice: The children begin creating their “My Body” self-portrait based on the teacher’s demonstration and their own description. The teacher encourages them to use colors and lines boldly to represent their physical features.
- (4) Sharing and communication: After completing their creations, the teacher organizes a sharing session where children show off their works and briefly describe their self-portraits. This helps improve children’s confidence and language expression ability.
- (5) TPR summary: Based on the sharing and communication, the teacher leads the children in a review of the entire creative process, reenacting key actions and creative steps using TPR teaching methods. This summary helps consolidate children’s memories and deepen their understanding of the painting process.

Through the integration of TPR teaching with the drawing lesson of “My Body” self-portrait, children not only improve their drawing skills and creativity, but also deepen their understanding and memory of body parts through physical movement. Additionally, this teaching method promotes children’s language expression and cognitive development, allowing them to experience the joy of painting in a playful environment ^[12].

5. Advantages and disadvantages of the TPR teaching method in early childhood English education

5.1. Advantages of TPR teaching method

- (1) It aligns with the acquisition process of mother-tongue teaching. By directly reflecting the mother-tongue teaching and removing the translation process, TPR helps children think in the target language, which is in line with children’s nature.
- (2) It caters to children’s active and lively nature. Teachers use body language to guide students in learning while moving, which releases some of their physical energy and increases their interest in learning. In addition, children typically have an intuitive thinking process, and TPR teaches the target language in a direct and easy-to-remember manner.
- (3) It helps develop children’s motor intelligence. Children can fully exercise and develop their motor

intelligence while learning the language through TPR.

- (4) It fosters a positive classroom atmosphere and reduces children's anxiety.
- (5) It cultivates children's interest in learning and mobilizes their learning enthusiasm.
- (6) It facilitates children's rapid understanding of the language, helps establish learning thinking, and is conducive to long-term memory.
- (7) It improves children's listening and speaking skills.

5.2. Disadvantages of TPR teaching method

The TPR teaching method has some inadequacies in early childhood English education, including the following:

- (1) High demands on teachers: The TPR teaching method requires teachers to have a good command of the target language and excellent physical language skills, as well as rich creativity and vitality. However, in practical teaching, not all teachers can use the TPR method well, which may lead to ineffective teaching results.
- (2) Limited applicable vocabulary: The TPR teaching method is suitable for some specific vocabulary and expressions. It may be difficult to use TPR to describe some abstract words and sentences, which may limit the breadth of early childhood English learning.
- (3) Overreliance on the target language: The TPR teaching method emphasizes learning language through physical movement, which may lead children to rely too much on physical movement and find it difficult to use the target language independently for communication ^[13].
- (4) Children resentment: The TPR teaching method involves a lot of game activities, role performances, group competitions, etc. Some children may not like this teaching method and thus develop resentment towards English learning.
- (5) Class size issues: The TPR teaching method requires teachers to provide sufficient guidance and attention to each child. However, in large classes, teachers may not be able to fully take care of each child, which may affect teaching effectiveness ^[14].

6. Conclusion

Although the TPR teaching method has its unique advantages, it also has certain limitations. Future research can explore how to combine TPR teaching method with other teaching methods to achieve more comprehensive and effective English teaching for young children. For example, TPR teaching method can be combined with situational teaching method, game teaching method, etc., to stimulate children's learning interest and enthusiasm through diversified teaching methods and improve their English application ability. Each child has different learning characteristics and needs, and future research can focus on how to achieve personalized and differentiated teaching through TPR teaching method. By understanding each child's learning style, interests, and needs, teachers can develop personalized teaching plans and adopt teaching methods suitable for different children to promote the all-round development of each child. This will help improve the pertinence and effectiveness of English teaching for young children, so that each child can obtain the best learning experience in English learning ^[15].

Disclosure statement

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