The Total Physical Response Method and Its Compatibility with Adult ESL Learners
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Dr. James J. Asher developed Total Physical Response (TPR) as a method of second language instruction beneficial to learners of any age, at any level. Asher (1988) described TPR simply as an "instructional strategy that not only makes a second language learnable for most people, but enjoyable" (chap. 2, p. 3). In this method, basically, the instructor issues commands in the target language, demonstrates the corresponding action, and directs the student to perform the same action. Asher has applied this method to learners of all ages, but some teachers may believe that adults would reject being ordered around or the activities themselves are too childish. Is TPR an effective method compatible with the needs of adult learners? To answer this question, I have first reviewed the principles and studies of TPR and then examined the method through Malcolm Knowles' (as cited in Boulmetis, 1999) Nine Characteristics of Adult Learners. I have found that far from being childish, TPR is compatible with many of the characteristics of adult learners, and the method can be effective in teaching a second language to adults, provided that activities are developed to meet their needs.

Background
In the development of TPR, Asher (1988) carefully considered how infants acquire language and based his method on three principles of first language acquisition: listening precedes speaking, language learning is associated with body movement, and listening skills ready a child for speaking (chap. 2, pp. 3-4). When speaking to a baby, parents commonly point to an object and clearly state its label, "ball," or instruct the child, "pet the doggie," and show through action what they mean by the utterance. Asher explained that infants are able to show comprehension by responding to the parent's utterance, such as "Pick up your red truck and bring it to me!" (chap. 2, p. 3); with no pressure, the infant slowly learns to respond and eventually tries to

speak, modeling first words on the input received over the course of months. Asher's TPR method developed from these observations and his early hypotheses of language acquisition.

Asher (1988) adapted the principles of first language acquisition to second language learning: (a) "Understanding the spoken language should be developed in advance of speaking"; (b) "Understanding should be developed through movements of the student's body"; and (c) without being forced, "The individual will spontaneously begin to produce utterances" (chap. 2, p. 4). Asher (1988) believed that optimally, second language learners acquire language on the "first exposure" (chap. 1, p. 8). The more powerful the first exposure, the better the retention (Asher).

Asher first explored this hypothesis with his associates Shirou Kunihira and Alice Dickie. According to Asher's (1988) instructions, Kunihira directed Dickie and Asher to perform actions. In this trial, Kunihira articulated one-word commands in Japanese, demonstrated the action, and then instructed the others to act. Asher and Dickie felt this initial experience effective and were "exhilarated" (Asher, 1988, chap. 1, p. 20).

The Method
Asher developed TPR further into its current form. In the first lessons, the teacher, using the imperative, quietly and calmly directs students to perform actions. For example, the teacher says, "Touch the door" in the target language, and models the action; next, the teacher asks the student to touch the door. These simple commands associated with concrete objects and body movements are built upon and combined, often in novel ways. The student's success in performing the actions is the measure of comprehension. Asher advised that students should receive 10 to 20 hours of input before speaking is encouraged; students who are tempted to speak too early are even

asked to hold off a little longer. After the initial phase of instruction, students enter into the speaking phase by voluntarily echoing the instructions or engaging in role reversal, in which the student issues the commands to the teacher or peers (Asher, 1988, chap. 3, p. 7). Garcia (1988), an early follower of Asher, recommended that the key to preparing the learner for role reversal is presenting the vocabulary in a variety of contexts, not exposing the student to a long list of vocabulary (sect. II, p. 18). To avoid boredom, he recommended keeping the pace fast while continuing to recycle the vocabulary in unexpected ways. Garcia stated that after 30 to 40 hours of instruction the students are ready for more creative activities such as role play (sect. I, p. 22).

Although grounded in listening and speaking skills, TPR can be adapted to reading and writing tasks. Asher (1988) recommended introducing written language by first having the students touch and manipulate letters. For example, the teacher tells a student to "pick up the 'j' and point to the light with the 'j'…scratch your nose with the 'f'" (Garcia, 1988, sect. II, p. 19). The same technique can be used to manipulate words and phrases. Garcia advised that teachers should smooth the transition between the four modes by integrating reading and writing tasks within the TPR lesson. For example, students may be invited to say the word on the card or perform the designated action, or the teacher may direct the student to write his name or pick up a card with a specific word or phrase written on it. Later, students can be asked to write down a scenario presented by the instructor, (i.e., take dictation) or, as a form of role reversal, compose a command for another student to perform (Garcia). Limited only by a teacher's imagination, TPR can be developed further, beyond simple tasks.

The TPR method is often accused of being ineffective in the teaching of more complex sentence structures and grammar. Asher (1988), however, stated that more complex structures—subordinate clauses, prepositional phrases, adverbials, and conditionals—can be taught using the imperative when imbedded within the command.

Studies on TPR
Asher has been involved in several experiments to determine the effectiveness of TPR. In a pilot study, Kunihira and Asher (as cited in Asher, 1966) quantitatively compared the comprehension and retention of Japanese by college students with no prior exposure to the language. Compared to the control group, the group instructed through TPR "had significantly better retention" (p. 80). Asher (1969) repeated this experiment using TPR to instruct students in Russian with identical results. When repeated with children, the results were "spectacular" (p. 82). In both studies, learners were instructed to remain silent, follow the tape-recorded commands and demonstrations, and act quickly. The commands increased in complexity over the course of the lesson. In a series of retention tests over a two-week period, students followed commands, some of which they had heard, others novel. *Novel utterances* are "recombinations of constituents…used directly in training" (Asher, 1988, chap. 3, p. 17). The teacher or peer assembles previously acquired vocabulary in ways the learner has not yet heard, often employing humor and silliness. Interestingly, in addition to supporting TPR's effectiveness, Asher (1969) found "motor acts during retention tests were more important than motor acts in training" (p. 257). That is to say, students who observe but do not physically act during instruction still learn the commands. In a follow-up experiment, students were invited to repeat the command before acting, but this did not increase retention (Asher, 1969).

Not all experiments with TPR involved Asher. Morganroth Schneider (1984) studied qualitatively the effectiveness of TPR for teaching Spanish. She adapted other activities—drama, games, puppets, and songs—to TPR. Morganroth Schneider found that "practical application validates the principal claims of the method" (p. 624). Students recognized the vocabulary, and after spontaneous production began, "the children showed no signs of stress or hesitation when asked to speak" (p. 624).

TPR Activities

In the interest of increasing the variety of contexts for new language, several additional activities have been specifically developed or adapted to work with TPR. Garcia (1988) stated, "One indispensable element in applying TPR is that there has to be some physical involvement included" (sect. I, p. 3). TPR Storytelling, Human Tic-Tac-Toe, and other games that integrate physical action exploit the fundamentals of this method.

TPR Storytelling

For exposing learners to vocabulary and complex structures, McKay (2001) recommended TPR Storytelling (TPR-S), a cycle of preparation for listening to a story. Through basic TPR, the instructor pre-teaches the vocabulary and phrases necessary to comprehend a short story. Later, when the story is told, the students have had enough input so that the tale is comprehensible. The teacher re-tells and expands the story. Later, the students tell the story using scaffolding such as illustrations and iconographs (e.g., arrows and simple stick figures). After students have learned several stories, they are encouraged to create variations or tell new stories (Cantonia, 1999), with the teacher providing sets of illustrations with which students can incorporate previously acquired vocabulary. One popular TPR-S technique is for the teacher, in re-telling the story, to leave out a word and have the students act it out (Cantonia). To check comprehension, the instructor may purposefully make a misstatement and pause for the students to correct spontaneously (McKay, 2001).

TPR Games

Many games can be adapted to include a physical component or otherwise fit the principles of TPR. McKay (2001) offered a version of Tic-Tac-Toe. In Human Tic-Tac-Toe, instead of using Xs and Os, students stand in the spaces on a large grid made on the floor with masking tape. Students are divided into teams. To take her place on the board, the student must finish a sentence, answer a question, or perform an action commanded by the teacher. If the student is incorrect or unsure, his/her teammate will model the answer for the student, who gets another chance to respond. Garcia (1988) offered his game Pancho Carrancho as a good Friday activity for reviewing vocabulary acquired throughout the week. The teacher and each student are assigned a word or phrase. The teacher says, "Pancho Carrancho doesn't eat turkey, he eats rice" (Garcia, 1988, sect. VI, p. 2). The student with the word *rice* replies, "Pancho Carrancho doesn't eat rice, he eats apples" (sect. VI, p. 2) or another assigned food. Score is kept, and students who make a mistake must perform a silly command or sing a song. Garcia also created TPR Bingo. The game is played much as the original on a grid of nine to 16 squares, except that the squares contain a stick drawing of an action, a symbol, or a word. But some learners, particularly adults, prefer puzzles to games. McKay (2001) suggested that students create their own crosswords and word search puzzles to share with classmates. Nevertheless, even with adaptation, the question remains whether TPR is effective with adult learners.

TPR and Adult Learners

Studies on the Effectiveness of TPR with Adults

Many of Asher's experiments supported the use of TPR with adult second language learners. Asher and Price (1967) conducted a quantitative study to compare listening comprehension of Russian of children and college-age adults by measuring retention rates. He divided the students into two groups: observe-act and act-act. The first group engaged in TPR learning but only observed during the instruction period (i.e., watched other students performing the teacher's modeled commands) and acted during assessment. The second group acted during the instruction period, performing the teacher's modeled commands, and used action to demonstrate comprehension during the assessment phase. Asher and Price found that adults "performed near the maximum possible score in comprehension" (p. 1222), exceeding the performance of eight- to fourteen-year-olds. Moreover, the study supported earlier findings that learners who merely observed during the initial instruction phase were similar in performance to those who executed the action. A study by Asher and Garcia (as cited

in Asher, 1969) reported that pre-pubescent children still have an advantage in developing native-like pronunciation.

Additional studies have supported Asher's findings for adult learners. Woodruff (as cited in Asher, 1988) found that students who had completed one semester of TPR instruction in German performed at the listening and reading skill level of second semester students in an audio-lingual program (Part II, p. 13). In addition, Woodruff (as cited in Asher) found that students were 50% more likely to continue with their foreign language studies (Part II, p. 13). The study also reported that students rated the course and instructor higher than students in traditional courses. Asher, Kusudo, and de la Torre (as cited in Asher, 1988) stated that Spanish students with 45 hours of TPR training exceeded the performance of students with 200 hours of audio-lingual method instruction on standard proficiency tests (p. 15). At the very least, it could be said that TPR is more effective than audio-lingual methods, but Asher felt more strongly. He advised, "For at least one semester in college, or six months to a year in elementary or high school, the goal of foreign language learning should be listening fluency only" (Asher, 1969, p. 261). For children and adults, "TPR is valuable for internalizing *any* new vocabulary item or structure" (Asher, 1988, chap. 3, p. 44).

TPR and Knowles' Nine Characteristics of Adult Learners
In his books and articles, Asher has encouraged others to investigate not whether the method is effective (as he felt its success had been repeatedly proven) but *why* it is effective. To investigate reasons why this method may be effective with adult learners, I have viewed TPR through Knowles' (as cited in Boulmetis, 1999) Nine Characteristics of Adult Learners (¶ 2). Below, each characteristic is examined individually to illustrate its compatibility with TPR, and I have considered how it might be adapted to better meet adult learner needs.

Adults need to control their learning. Some may expect that adults resent being ordered around, which would leave them decidedly without control. Based on his observations, Asher

(1988) stated that adult students do not resist obeying commands if they are issued in a "friendly manner" (chap. 3, p. 3) and the method is introduced to the students properly. Asher, believing that adults are more than willing to go along once convinced of the method's success, suggested showing the students one of the available documentary films or moving the students "firmly but gently" (chap. 3, p. 3) through the process to initial success. As stated earlier, in TPR the learner speaks when ready; the instructor does not demand it. Knowles (1978) stated, "Adults can best identify their own readiness-to-learn" (p. 185). Low pressure to perform gives learners an incredible amount of control over their learning process. Similarly, when issuing commands to peers, the learner can decide on the complexity he is willing to attempt, length of utterance, use of humor, or content. When engaging in role reversal, learners regain control. Bragger (1982) created activities that empower the student based on "negative responses to teacher commands" (p. 9). (For these activities, students have already entered an active speaking phase.) One variation gives the student the option of refusing to follow the teacher's or peer's command and suggesting an alternative action he would like to do; in another, the student only responds if the command was grammatical or accurately pronounced. Through the latter two, the teacher may encourage awareness of accuracy in higher-level students. Bragger characterized this experience as a "unique, egotistically rewarding, and linguistically productive experience" (p. 11). Once adult learners have acquired some basic structures and vocabulary, they are better able to direct their own learning, make content requests, and interject their own creativity.

Adults need to feel that learning has immediate utility (i.e., that the application of ideas has to be delayed). In TPR, students utilize the language learned to physically relate to everyday objects and situations, which leads to usability. In the teaching of adults, Knowles (1978) has likewise recommended that more use be made of "experiential techniques" (p. 185). Asher (1988) stated, "Abstractions should be delayed until students have internalized a detailed cognitive map of the target language" (chap. 2,

p. 12). Learners need to internalize the structure of the language before less concrete items can be introduced. Later, abstract ideas can be explained in the target language (Asher, 1988), or after students have learned to read, abstractions can be introduced as words on cards.

Adults need to feel that learning focuses on issues that directly concern them. As with many teaching methods, TPR is weak on addressing student concerns at the beginning stages of instruction. The main strategy of TPR is to keep the students occupied by moving them forward in the ability to comprehend in the least stressful manner; however, content that revolves around normal classroom paraphernalia could bore adults. Instead, adjusting the content of the lesson—the tasks and stories—to the adult learner can make a task age appropriate. To adapt TPR-S to the adult learner, the content can be matched to the students' interests or needs. For example, McKay (2001) wrote a paragraph about a robbery at a drug store, which included the words *rob*, *enter*, *grab*, and *see*. For more realism, TPR-S about events in the local news can be modeled after the basic fictional tales in McKay's text. For students interested in functioning in the language, in-class activities can be worked around their work environments or everyday tasks such as mailing a package at the post office.

Adults need to test their learning as they go along, rather than receive background theory and general information. In providing immediate and continuous feedback to the learner, TPR seems ideal. Learners are constantly being asked to respond to novel commands that test their understanding with no discussion of grammar. Asher (1988) recommended that when a learner is unable to perform a command, another learner can model the action, which gives the first learner another opportunity to perform, usually with success. Grammar is experienced through action, not viewed as a separate topic. In fact, an expert on teaching grammar is not required. Asher (1988) suggested that a learner locate a sympathetic native speaker to teach the language through TPR. By following the simple method of command and demonstrate, someone with no experience teaching could guide a learner through the early stages of language learning. For self-directed learning, Asher reminds the learner not to use translation or the first language: "Be silent, listen, watch and act" (chap. 3, p. 37).

Adults need to anticipate how they will use their learning. In designing a lesson, the teacher has a significant role in making the learning appear useful. Through *extensive* preparation, the teacher can help a student anticipate the day's language goals and the lesson's applicability. By bringing in realia, posters, and detailed images on overhead slides, the TPR instructor creates a rich context within the classroom. When the classroom is stocked with realia related to food, the student can guess today they are going shopping and anticipate the required functional language demands. Moreover, the instructor will enable the learner to anticipate the lesson by incorporating learner interests into choice of content.

Adults need to expect performance improvement to result from their learning. Because acquisition is rapid in TPR, students should enter the classroom expecting to leave with an extraordinary amount of new language. Garcia (1998) recommended that at the beginning of a TPR class the instructor tell the students, "Before you leave this room today, you will understand everything I am going to say next," (sect. II, p. 1), then rattle off a series of vocabulary and commands, and finally convince them through the fun and effective lesson. Most adult learners are willing to suspend their disbelief long enough to try a method that promises ease, and with success, they are convinced. During a lesson, it is important for the instructor to manage the "pacing" (Garcia, sect. II, p. 11) so that the student is led to success, not deception. (In TPR, there are no trick questions.) Through their experiences, learners will expect success with new vocabulary, equating that with improvement.

Adult learning is greatest when it maximizes available resources. The TPR learning environment is rich in context from readily available everyday objects and situations—and the student's own body. Students can easily practice with a tape and objects assembled from around the home. The use of the body and realia works toward retention in part because of "believability" (Garcia, 1988, sect.

I, p. 17). Garcia, citing Asher's work on comprehension through physical behavior, explained it thusly: The student hears a command, "Pick up the pencil," and observes the corresponding action. His brain *believes* that this is a new label for this familiar action because it witnessed its own body complete the activity (Asher, as cited in Garcia, 1998, sect. I, p. 17). The classroom is a familiar environment for many adult learners, so the teacher should make full use of every "object, person, and location" (Garcia, sect. II, p. 17). In addition to usual classroom items, the teacher and students have access to clothing and an array of verbs for commands, including those not expected in a classroom, such as *jump*. Learners often cite improved vocabulary as an important goal. The TPR method is geared toward vocabulary expansion. To expand vocabulary, Garcia (1988) recommended that the instructor use basic available resources such as the chalkboard, everyday props, and simple iconographs drawn on cards.

Adult learning requires a climate that is collaborative, respectful, mutual, and informal. The TPR method addresses all of these concerns. Although this method appears to emphasize individual performance, there is a collaborative aspect to TPR. Garcia (1988) advised, "Collective participation should be encouraged from the beginning" (sect. I, p. 4), starting with applause. Many suggested commands in beginning-level TPR include sequences performed by several students in the class, such as, "Sally, when John picks up the pencil, you tell Sam to write his name on the board." Each one performing his best allows the group to succeed in performing the sequence. TPR is respectful in that students are not pressured to speak or demonstrate (Asher, 1988). The TPR classroom can certainly be informal. "The teacher in the TPR approach should foster an atmosphere of jubilation and general

euphoria" (Garcia, 1988, sect. I, p. 4). Garcia recommended, "Keep that square dance moving" because "the show itself is fun to watch and they know that anyone in the group, including themselves, may be next in line to be the performer instead of the spectator" (sect. I., p. 4). The use of humor, first names, peer demonstrations, and peer-issued commands all contribute to a positive, informal yet respectful environment for the adult learner.

Adult learning relies on information that is appropriate to what is known at a given time (i.e., it is developmentally paced). TPR is structured and generally follows the constructivist format of simple structures being built upon in order to create more complex structures. Following basic commands, hearing and seeing repetition, and experiencing the slow pace of TPR, the student is able to develop on his own timeline. Moreover, even when a student enters the program a little late in the semester, because vocabulary and structures are introduced in a concrete and physical way, much can still be acquired.

Conclusion

Is TPR an effective method compatible with the needs of adult learners? Numerous studies have shown the effectiveness of the TPR method for learners both children and adults (Asher, 1966; 1969; 1988; Asher & Price, 1967, Morganroth Schneider, 1984), and developing listening skills through TPR "seems to have positive transfer to the other three skills, especially speaking" (Asher, 1969, p. 261). Moreover, as shown above, it appears compatible with many of the characteristics of adult learners. Although some adaptation by the instructor is required, learning a second language through the TPR method—with its humor, dramatic results, and immediacy— would appeal to many adults.

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