Teaching English as a Second Language in Nigeria: The Total Physical Response Option for Beginners

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Abstract

This paper examines learning English in an adverse situation especially in Nigeria where a second language is used as the language of instruction. It focuses on Total Physical Response (T.P.R) as one of the teaching strategies that can enhance the learning of English as a second language in Nigeria. The concept, the historical background of TPR and its efficacy in promoting effective acquisition and learning of English language in comparison with other traditional methods was unveiled. This technique of language teaching tends to teach vocabularies and develop listening comprehension through some simple commands by the instructor (teacher) and responses by the learners which served as a replica to the mother tongue or first language acquisition process. The paper discusses the relationship between Total Physical Response and the learning of English language most especially as it relates to beginners in the language. The stages involved in the strategy to make meaningful impact were as well explained. The paper also examines the benefit of TPR in a typical English as a second language class and the basic steps to follow for its effective utilization dwelling on its psychological perspective in which language acquisition is viewed to initially start with psychomotor activities before the language is used in a spoken situation. It is the position of the paper that an effective English language teacher must take into cognizance some salient issues to effectively utilize the strategy optimally. This is in tandem with the principle of using psychomotor activities in a four walled classroom with a single teacher and a large number of learners as is the case in the Nigerian situation. Thus, precaution must be taken to guard against turning the class into a rowdy and disorganized one in order to tap the benefit of the strategy to lay a sound foundation in the target language.

Key Words: Second Language Learning; Total Physical Response

Introduction

There is an utmost quest to find the best methods and strategies to teach the four language skills most especially when the language in question is L2 (second language). This quest becomes more paramount when the L2 is the language of instruction most especially in Nigeria where multilingual situation exists. Scholars and linguists alike made several attempts and efforts towards finding and or devising effective strategies to ease English language pedagogical issues. English language can be said to be the sole language of Education in Nigeria going by its central and enviable position as the official as well as language of instruction in the country's educational system as outlined in the language policy provisions of the National Policy on Education (F.R.N., 2013). In addition, English language is a core subject at Primary, Junior and Senior Secondary Schools levels of Education in Nigeria. Similarly, it is the subject area that its incompetency causes difficulties in learning other subject areas for students in schools. Sadly, English language has been reported to be one of the most poorly taught and abysmally understood subjects in Nigeria. Some studies conducted on factors responsible for the poor performance of students in English have proven that, teacher factor is the most frequent factor, in which most of the teachers are ill-equipped on applying different strategies in teaching the second language in Nigeria. This factor undoubtedly can be one of the reasons for the poor performance being recorded in the subject (English) over the years as is evident in (Azikwe 2007) and other similar findings.

There are different methodologies for teaching English as a second language, though some students find it difficult to understand through traditional methods that are mostly used by second language teachers. Various methods such as total language immersion, memorization approach, oral approach, audio visual approaches, play approach and many others were explored to teach one or more skills in second language pedagogy. Total language immersion involves completely surrounding the learner by the target language. This is often done through study abroad programs or by only speaking in the target language in the classroom. Language has traditionally been taught through memorization and rote learning processes. Students are presented with vocabulary and grammar in the target language and are expected to memorize the words and the attendant grammar rules. This approach mainly focuses on grammar instruction, reading and writing in the target language.

Learning English as a Second Language Scenario in Nigeria

English language occupies the position of second language in Nigeria in spite of the over 400 indigenous languages in the country. Though the language was a result of missionary and colonial activities witnessed in the country, it has enjoyed this position for decades. The exposure of students to this language right from lower basic level as a subject through to secondary level of education as both a subject and a medium of instruction has not yielded the needed result in terms of proficiency among learners. In many public schools learners at primary level of education in Nigeria find it very difficult to read in English, for instance Omobe & Omobe (2015) decried the poor reading and mathematical status of many public primary schools in Nigeria. These two subjects are foundations for further learning. Secondary education fails even more though in part the failure is due to inadequate preparation given in primary schools. Proficiency in the language becomes

paramount as it is made the language of instruction with which all other subjects on the school curriculum are learnt. The failure in learning the language effectively could not be unconnected to factors revolving around the teachers, the learners and the environment. If the teachers are ill equipped and use inappropriate strategies most especially at the early stages of learners' exposure to the language, chances are that they (learners) will be ill trained. Most classes for learning are overcrowded and according to Jagaba, (2021) the larger the number of students in the class the less opportunity there is for anyone to obtain the attention s/he wants and needs. Therefore it is pertinent to explore and use effective strategies to curtail the lack of competence and poor usage of the language among learners.

Historical Background of Total Physical Response (TPR)

Total physical response as a technique was first postulated in 1960s by James Asher, an American professor of psychology. It is a natural approach that serves as a strategy for teaching language by involving students in physical activities. The technique is based on command activities. Children in learning their first language, appear to do a lot of listening before they speak, and their listening is accompanied by physical responses (reaching, grabbing, moving, looking, and so forth). The proponent believes that for language learning to be effective, motor activity which is a right-brain function should precede left-brain activity which is responsible for language processing. Asher was also convinced that language classes were often the focus of too much anxiety and wished to devise a method that was as stress free as possible, where learners would not feel overly self-conscious and defensive. The T.P.R classroom, then, was one in which students did a deal of listening and acting. The teacher was very directive in orchestrating a performance: According to Asher (1996) the instructor is like the director of a stage play where as the students are the actors. The method is built around the coordination of speech and action. It attempt to teach language through (motor activity).

In a typical T.P.R classroom, the teacher gives verbal comprehensible stimulus (instructions) and students act or (physically) respond according to it. The method shows the evidence of the input and output of the learning process. The students thus learn language through actions rather than through drills. Concerning the students' output reaction, their "understanding" is predominantly expressed by acting and speaking skill is stifled. This characteristic of T.P.R can be employed for very young learners who cannot yet make a whole sentence in the second language but they understand due to context. The advantage of the technique can be taken when students have a so called 'silent period', which means that they do not speak but respond in a different way, e.g. pointing to a picture, performing, gesturing or nodding or just responding with a simple "yes" or "no" to express that they understand and participate in the lesson. The method is an example of the comprehension approach to language teaching. The listening and responding (with actions) serves two purposes: It is a means of quickly recognizing meaning in the language being learned, and a means of passively learning the structure of the language itself. Grammar is not taught explicitly, but can be learn from the language input. Thus, it is a valuable way to learn vocabulary, especially phrasal verbs.

Total Physical Response (T.P.R) is believed by Heflin (2020) to be a language teaching

strategy that supports the learning styles and needs of many different learners on many different levels especially in the area of vocabulary and language acquisition. It enables students to acquire new English vocabularies and how they can be used to form sentences by listening to and carrying out spoken commands. In early T.P.R activities, learners are not required to speak. The tutor models the commands and continually repeats and reviews them until the students can carry out the commands with no difficulty. Learners are more likely to be and feel successful when the tutor provides constant support and modeling and eliminates the pressure on learners to speak the new words. Although T.P.R can be used with students at all levels, it is most useful with beginning students who understand little or no Language proficiency. Since a teacher will be modeling the action as he speaks, it will be important to use gestures and facial expressions.

With beginning students, first teach commands that call for simple body movements and props: *stand up, sit down, walk,* and *turn around.* Starting with such basic commands gives learners a welcome feeling of accomplishment and helps them become comfortable with T.P.R right away. Students can go on to more advanced T.P.R activities in which they interact with props and people in the learning environment. Examples of commands to use at this stage are *touch the, point to, pick up, put down,* and *give me etc.* Berty (2000) believes these are especially useful for teaching both the names of objects in pictures and of objects that are in the immediate environment, some of which may be out of reach.

Advantages of Using Total Physical Response
There is evidence that TPR can impact on learning of a foreign or second language most especially among beginners in the target language children or adults alike. The experiment by Asher (2000) together with classroom observations of children and adults (Garcia, 2001) suggest that a linear progression from comprehension to production is imperative for most students (perhaps 955) if they are to achieve multi-skill fluency in a second language. Below are a few of the many benefits of TPR.

1. It promotes instant understanding of the target language regardless of academic aptitude.
2. Actions help build connections in the brain, triggering memory and recall thereby increasing speed and long-term retention of learnt materials (permanent learning).
3. It is a stress-free activity as it involves simple and everyday actions and speeches.
4. It helps to review and reinforce vocabularies already taught using non-T.P.R methods.
5. It serves as a "catch-up" at the beginning of a lesson for the benefit of pupils who missed previous lessons in which new material was introduced.
6. It provides learners with an enjoyable, relaxing break during a lesson.
7. It attracts learners' attention (especially kinesthetic learners) in learning the language as they learn through active and joyful participation.
8. Learners will be fully engaged thereby reducing the teacher's effort in getting the message across.

9. It is an effective strategy for building vocabulary, comprehension and communication skills most especially in second language learning.
10. It helps learners to develop practical use of the language etc.

Second Language Learning and T.P.R
T.P.R research opened up the concept that for children's acquisition and adults learning another language in school, success can be assured if comprehension is develop before speaking. One important reason is that everywhere on earth in all languages throughout history, there is no instance of infants acquiring speaking before comprehension. Comprehension always comes first then speaking follows perhaps a year later. A second reason is that talking and comprehension are located in different parts of the brain. Talking comes from Broca's area located in the frontal lobe of the left brain. If there is damage in Broca's area, one may understand what people are saying but the person is unable to speak. Understanding or comprehension takes place in Wernicke's area located in the temporal lobe. If there is damage to Wernicke's area, one can speak but has difficulty in understanding what others are saying. This has significance for language instruction especially in a second language classroom context. The Total Physical Response Approach is designed to develop vocabularies, comprehension as well as basic communication skills. This approach to teaching language has been proven to be particularly effective with limited English proficient students or beginners in second language learning as it was related to language background knowledge which will gradually develop overtime. Most often than not, T.P.R. entails 3 stages; Comprehension otherwise called pre-production stage; Early production stage and Speech emergence stage.

Stage I: Comprehension (Pre-production)
In order to maximize opportunities for the comprehension skill, T.P.R Approach instructors should:
a. Always use visual aids (pictures, realia, gestures) where necessary.
b. Modify his speech to aid comprehension, speak more slowly, emphasize key words, simplify vocabulary and grammar, use related ideas and do not talk out of context.
c. Not force speech production. Students will use English when they are ready, as they sometimes experience a "silent period" which may last days or weeks.
d. Focus attention on key vocabularies.

Teacher Activities in Pre-production Stage
a. Teacher gives commands to which the students react with their bodies as well as their brains. (Shut the door, sit down, come here)
b. The teacher should supply meaningful input based on items in the classroom or brought to class. (Who has a red pen? Who is wearing a blue skirt? Where is the black book)
c. The teacher should supply meaningful input based on pictures displayed in the class. (The cat is running, it is raining, Umar is writing)

Students' Responses in Pre-production Stage.
a. An action (TPR) shutting the door, sitting down, moving towards the teaching etc.
b. Gestures

c. Students point to an item or picture.

d. Children do not initially make many attempts to communicate using words; rather they indicate their comprehension nonverbally.

Stage 2: Early Speeches

In non-threatening environments, students move voluntarily into Stage 2. This Stage starts when students begin using English words to give:

a. Yes/no answers

b. One-word answers

c. Lists of words

d. Two word strings and short phrases

The following are instructor question techniques to encourage the transition from Stage I to Stage 2.

a. Yes/no questions (Is Ahmad wearing a sweater today?)

b. Choice questions (Is this a pencil or an eraser?)

c. Questions which can be answered with a single word. (What is she eating?
Rice.

d. General questions which encourage lists of words. (What do we see on the table now?)
Book, pen, bag, ruler and chalk.

e. Open sentence with pause for learners' response. (Sadiq is eating a green apple while Zainab is eating a......... apple.)

During the Early Speech Stage, the teacher must give a meaningful and understandable input which will encourage the transition to Stage three (3). Therefore learners' responses should be expanded if possible. Here is a sample exchange between the teacher and the pupils:

Teacher: What can we see from this picture?

Class: A boy.

Teacher: Yes, there is a boy in this picture. Is there a man?

Class: Yes.

Teacher: Yes, there is. There is a boy and a man. Where is the man?

Class: in the car.

Teacher: Yes that's right. The man is in the car. Is he driving the car?

Class: Yes he is driving.

Teacher: Yes, he is. He's driving the car.

Other sorts of activities which can be used in Early Speech Stage:

a. open dialogues

b. guided interviews

c. open-ended sentences

Stage 3: Speech Emergence

In the Speech Emergence Stage, speech production will normally improve in both quantity and quality. The sentences that the pupils produce become longer, more complex and they use a wider range of vocabularies. Finally, the number of errors will slowly decrease. Learners need to be given the opportunity to use oral and written language whenever possible. When they reach the stage in which speech is emerging beyond the two-word stage, there are many sorts of activities which will foster more comprehension

and speech. Some suggestions are:

    a. Starting with simple sentence formation through some questions by the teacher and responses or gestures by students. E.g.
       Teacher: What is Maryam doing?
       Class: Maryam is walking,
       Teacher: What is Faruk doing?
       Class: Faruk is writing,

    b. Followed by compound sentences. E.g.
       Teacher: What are Aisha and Zainab doing?
       Class: Aisha is writing and Zainab is reading.
       Aliyu is walking but Salma is jumping etc.

c. Then they would finally be introduced to develop complex and compound complex sentences.

d. group discussion

e. writing exercises (especially Language Experience Approach)

f. reading etc. Bancroft (2009)

Basic Steps in Using Total Physical Response (TPR)

In teaching language through Total Physical Response the following steps should be followed:

1. The teacher should select the commands (and vocabularies) he is going to teach.

2. Before the teaching session, the teacher should make a list of the complete commands in the order he plan to teach them. (The list will serve as a record of what he has taught, and will help him plan review activities for later lessons. Lists are also important when working with more advanced students who will be learning longer and more complex commands. The list will enable the teacher to repeat his exact instructions in case a pupil asks him to do so.)

3. All equipments, props, pictures or any electronic device that might be needed to set the context or illustrate the meaning of the commands should be gathered in preparation for the lesson.

4. When dealing with a large group, the teacher should select two or three students for demonstration.

(Teaching more than one student at the same time takes the pressure of any individual learner. The other pupils in the class will also be learning as they watch. When he finishes the demonstration, he can invite other pupils to carry out the commands they saw him teach.)

5. Teach the commands.

a. The teacher should model the action as he gives the first command. The use of gestures and facial expressions to help the students understand what he want them to do could be of paramount importance in this regard.

b. Do the action with the students several times, and give the command each time he does the action. (If he is teaching the English words for objects, he will need to work with only one student at a time as the others watch—unless he has enough objects for more than one pupil.)

c. Give the command without doing the action himself.

d. Model the action again as he says the command if the pupils have difficulty carrying out the command. Always be ready to help out if necessary.

e. Repeat steps a-d for each command as planned. Before introducing each new command, review the commands he has already taught. Review them in the same order that he taught them.

f. Finally, review all the commands in random order.

6. This step is optional for more advanced students in order to develop reading comprehension:

Teach the students to read the commands they have just learned. Use the following steps:

a. Write each command on a separate card.

b. Show and read the first command aloud as you model the action.

c. Show and read the same command aloud as you do the action with the students.

d. Show the card without reading or modeling it. Gesture for the students to carry out the action

(They should not read the card aloud.)

e. Repeat these steps with each card. Before introducing each new card, review the written commands you have already taught. Review them in the same order that you taught them.

f. Finally, mix up the cards and review the commands in random order. Brown (2007)

Salient Issues to Ponder in Using Total Physical Response Strategy

Despite the efficacy of total physical response strategy in promoting effective learning of English as a second language, there some salient issues that the second language teacher should take into cognizance while utilizing the strategy:

i. T.P.R can only be used with new words as using words already known by students will make the lesson less interesting.

ii. At a point the physical modeling has to be dropped to allow for more communication as the learners progresses.

iii. The strategy has to be used in conjunction with other methods and techniques.

iv. T.P.R. cannot be used too often otherwise the lesson could become repetitive.

v. If not properly organized, students may sometime find it difficult to understand lessons through total physical response. Asher (1996) cautions users against what he calls 'the illusion of simplicity, that teachers should not underestimate the difficulties learners may faced in the process.

vi. Certain commands can mislead students from better understanding of the lesson most especially when the teacher hesitates often in giving out such commands.

vii. Giving too much instruction (commands) may create confusion in developing proper comprehension of the lesson etc.

viii. The use of T.P.R is limited as it is best suited for beginners (children or adults) in the language and those struggling with it (second language).

ix. Teachers should tolerate students' errors and refrain from too much correction of learners at the early stages of learning to allow for a stress free procedure in line with a child's learning to speak from his parent.

Conclusion

TPR is based on the premise that the human brain has a biological program for acquiring any natural language on earth - including the sign language of the deaf. The process is visible when we observe how infants internalize their first language. The secret is a unique "conversation" between the parent and infant. The parent speaks and the infant answers with a physical response such as looking, smiling, laughing, turning, walking, reaching, grasping, holding, sitting, running, and so forth. It is thus believed that second language can be acquired by learners following similar steps and stages. Total Physical Response is therefore a teaching technique in which lessons are designed through drills where the instructor gives some commands while students respond to the commands with physical actions. Initially, students learn the meaning of the commands they hear by direct observation. After they learn the meaning of the words in these commands, the teacher issues commands that use novel combinations of the words the students have learnt. Instructors limit the number of new vocabulary items given to students at a given time. This is to help students differentiate the new words from those previously learned, and to facilitate integration with their existing language knowledge. Students are able to comprehend and internalize the target language through engagements to some novel commands that are repetitive and interesting.

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