

THE EFFECT OF USING TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE (TPR) ON EFL YOUNG LEARNERS' VOCABULARY AND SPEAKING FLUENCY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at the investigation of the effects of using the TPR approach in teaching vocabulary to very young learners; and to explore the attitudes of young learners towards learning vocabulary using the TPR approach; when TPR is applied in EFL teaching and creating effective classroom activities. From the review of related literature, pedagogical implications would be made to help EFL teachers take TPR into account while teaching a foreign language and familiarize EFL teachers with implications of this language teaching method in the classroom.

Keywords: *TPR approach, vocabulary, young learners, speaking fluency, English teaching, characteristics of young learners*

TÓM TẮT

Sự ảnh hưởng của việc sử dụng phương pháp TPR về từ vựng và khả năng nói của trẻ em

Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích điều tra sự ảnh hưởng của việc sử dụng phương pháp TPR trong việc dạy từ vựng cho trẻ em; và để khảo sát thái độ của người học đối với việc học từ vựng bằng cách sử dụng phương pháp TPR; khi phương pháp TPR được áp dụng trong giảng dạy tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ nước ngoài để tạo ra các hoạt động trong lớp học hiệu quả. Thông qua các nghiên cứu liên quan, các ý nghĩa sư phạm sẽ được thực hiện để giúp giáo viên dạy tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ nước ngoài đưa phương pháp TPR vào trong giảng dạy ngoại ngữ và giúp họ làm quen ý nghĩa của phương pháp dạy ngôn ngữ này trong lớp học.

Từ khóa: *phương pháp TPR, từ vựng, trẻ em, nói lưu loát, việc dạy tiếng Anh, đặc điểm của trẻ em*

1. INTRODUCTION

English today becomes a global phenomenon in the 21st century and English learning has become an important educational issue in Asia in general and in Vietnam particularly. Nowadays, English is considered a foreign language and has been included in elementary schools' language curriculum in Vietnam. Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) has become its own field of study as the age of compulsory English education has become lower and lower in countries around the world. Even in countries where families may choose the foreign language for their children to study, English is "overwhelmingly the first choice" (Garton, Copland, & Burns, 2011, p. 5). The growing demand for English, plus parents' belief that English skills provide their children with a better education and better employment opportunities, are the forces driving English, to be introduced at earlier ages. Many students now start English at younger and younger some as low as the ages of five or six. There are two major reasons for an early start in English: the

value of English for education and employment, and the educational benefits of early language learning.

Moreover, the education policy for English in the Vietnamese public primary schools fall in line with the national education policy for English in Primary established by the Minister of Education and Training of Vietnam. In particular, the National Foreign Language 2020 Project was launched to develop English learners' communicative competence by deploying child-centered communicative teaching methods, themes and topics which are meaningful to young learners.

Additionally, more and more children are learning English as a foreign language at foreign language centers such as the ones in Tra Vinh city, especially at Victory Informatics Foreign Language Center (VIFL) for the following reasons. Firstly, VIFL is one of the largest foreign language centers in Tra Vinh city, Tra Vinh province in Viet Nam. It belongs to Tra Vinh University (TVU) and is a prestigious foreign language center in Tra Vinh city. Secondly, it has various study programs with different levels for learners from very young children (from five to six-year-old learners) to adults. Presently there are more than three thousand learners with a variety of levels from Jerry 1, 2, 3 to IELTS 4, 5, 6 and English for Communication for them to choose from. VIFL can meet the future needs and wants of the learners. The number of very young learners at the age of 5 and 6 in VIFL has increased every year, so an ever more effective English Young Learner (EYL) program is necessary for VIFL. Following are some of the common features of an effective EYL program: focuses on meaning, provides fun in the classroom, sets up children for success, and fosters learner autonomy (Nikolov and Curtain, 2000). Additionally, according to Gilzow (2002), in some content, effective EYL programs used technology appropriately, had adequate funding and provided professional development. Therefore, it is necessary for each individual teacher of VIFL to master and use teaching methods effectively for very young learners.

However, learning to speak English well and vocabulary retention are problems for many learners of English, especially for young learners. As a teacher of VIFL, Tra Vinh city, Tra Vinh province, from the author's observation and teaching experience, teachers who have taught young learners at the age of 5 to 9 have difficulties teaching them. The first reason for this is because they are very young to start learning English, so it is very difficult for them to remember the words they have learned. The second problem is that they are too active, noisy and talkative and cannot sit quietly, but usually stand up and move around the class during the lesson, so the teacher cannot control the class and give them an effective lesson. These children often forget what they learned in the previous lesson from a few weeks or months before, so this affects their speaking fluency. Thus, one of the challenges to the teacher is to discover the answer to the question "Which is the most effective technique be used in teaching English for young learners to help them remember vocabulary in the long-term?"

Based on the psychological characteristics of the learners, young learners tend to have short attention spans coupled with a lot of physical energy. Besides, they are much linked to their surroundings and are more interested in the physical and the tangible than the abstract. As Scott and Ytreberg (1990) describe, "Their own understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times." (p. 2). Therefore, teachers should pay much attention to find suitable teaching methods and techniques to help very young learners memorize vocabulary in long-term memory. This can positively affect their speaking fluency. Among several approaches to teaching and learning a foreign language, TPR (Total Physical Response) is primarily used in conventional educational settings (Asher, 1966). Using the TPR approach is considered to be an effective method to help language learners to remember, collect, use and retrieve words in long –

term memory. Moreover, using the TPR approach to teach vocabulary for young learners is one pedagogical strategy which attracts the attention of not only English teachers but also the learners concerned. In addition, TPR is internationally known as a stress-free approach for second language acquisition and one which simulates the way children naturally acquire their mother tongue. It really helps students to remember phrases or words while promoting an enjoyable learning experience among students with minimum stress. Historically, there has been little practical discussion of how effective the use of TPR with young learners' study of vocabulary and speaking fluency is.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The definition of Total Physical Response (TPR)

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a method of teaching English developed by Dr. James J Asher (1966). It is based upon the theory that this is the way that children learn their mother tongue. TPR is a language teaching method built around the coordination of speech and action; it attempts to teach language through physical (motor) activity (Jack C. Richards & Theodore S. Rodgers, 2002). In Krashen's *The Natural Approach* (1983) the teacher uses the target language communicatively to students from the beginning of the instruction throughout the course. The teacher uses pictures and occasional words in the students' native language and by being as expressive as possible, which helps her students to understand easily (Bölcşész Konzorcium, 2006, p.20).

TPR introduces language skills or components in an action in which a teacher serves three roles: an order taker, a model provider, and an action monitor. The students serve as models and action performers until they feel ready to speak out. When using this method, FL instructors give a series of commands in the target language (e.g., jump and clap your hands), while learners are expected to respond with whole-body movements (e.g., to jump while clapping their hands). TPR is supported by several theoretical approaches to learning situations. For instance, Dale's (1969) *Audiovisual Method in Teaching* claims that students learn most efficiently when all of their senses are engaged in the learning process, while *The Natural Approach* (Krashen & Terrell, 1986) claims that children learn a second language more effectively when they learn it naturally, in a stimulating environment that facilitates a low affective filter and encourages a progressive development from language comprehension to language production

2.2. The definition of very young learners

Young learners mean children from the first year of formal schooling (five or six years old) to eleven or twelve years of age (Sarah Phillips, 1993, p.3). According to Purwaningsih, "Young Learners are learners in Elementary School aging 9-10 years old who are learning English as foreign language". According to Etty Maryati Hoesein, "Young Learners are students of Elementary School who are at grade four up to grade six. Their ages range from ten to twelve years of age. They have learned English for about one up to four years". From these three statements, we may conclude that very young learners are students who are studying English in Elementary School aging 5-9 and that they have been studying English as second language for about one or two years. In other words, we may say that very young Learners are English foreign language learners, age 5-9.

2.3. The characteristics of young learners

According to Wadsworth, B. J. (1971) psychologist Jean Piaget, there are four stages of learners' cognitive development: (1) the sensorimotor stage (birth to age two), (2) the pre-operational stage (from age two to age seven), (3) concrete operational stage (from age seven to age eleven), (4) the formal operational stage (age eleven to adolescence and adulthood). Children aged 8-10 are

mature enough; They have a particular point of view; They are able to describe the difference between facts and fictions; They are curious and ask many questions; They believe in what is said and the real world to express and comprehend meaning/message; They have distinct opinions about what they like and what they dislike; They are open to what happens in the classroom and begin asking teacher's for a decision; and They can cooperate with each other and learn from others (Scott & Lisbeth, 1992).

In the context of teaching, most people assume that children learn a foreign language in the same way that they learn their mother tongue. Basically, children have a high potential in acquiring and learning a foreign language, and even learn it more quickly than those who are learning the foreign language after puberty (McLaughlin, 1978). On the other hand, children are less capable of absorbing or acquiring a foreign language optimally (Long, 1990).

2.4. The definition of vocabulary retention

Learning vocabulary plays an important role in language learning because Gass (1999) notes "learning a second language means learning its vocabulary" (p. 325). Vocabulary is necessary for language learning and both research and experience create an awareness of this view (Folse, 2004). Noticing plays an important role in vocabulary retention. Noticing is the process of "giving attention to an item" (Nation, 2001, p. 74). Kargozari, and Ghaemi (2011) state that "during noticing, the word is taken out of its message context for a certain period of time to be studied as a single item" (p. 1655). According to Folse (2006), different exercise types can draw learners' attention to a specific vocabulary item, and make the learners notice to the particular word. Craik and Lokhart (1975, as cited in Folse, 2006) assert that depth of processing is another important factor affecting vocabulary learning and retention. The second important factor is Retrieval. Nation (2001) states that retrieval is the remembering and recalling of a word with the same meaning in different contexts (Nation, 2001, p. 80). "The more the incidents of retrieval that take place at reasonably long intervals, the better the learning" (Kargozari, & Ghaemi, 2011, p. 1655). The third factor is generation which Nation (2001) defines as meeting a word in different contexts with different meaning of the words.

2.5. The definition of speaking fluency

Speaking is considered as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Brown, 1994). Richards (1990) states that the mastery of speaking skill in English is seen as a priority for many EFL learners across the world and learners are consequently evaluated on the success of their language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course based on how well they feel they have improved their spoken language skill. Many approaches have been implemented in order to increase the performance of the speaking skill in EFL learners. Speaking is considered the only source for communication. Harmer (1995,16) found that the Communicative approach makes emphasis on a balance between fluency and accuracy and it is the most appropriate for those learners who want to improve and gain confidence with their speaking skills. Students need to practice speaking English as often as possible so that they are able to speak English fluently and accurately. An important part of speaking English, is the knowledge of two important components. These components influence how well people speak English. According to Syakur (1987), speaking is a complex skill because at least it is concerned with the components of vocabulary and fluency.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary means all the words known by a particular individual and the appropriate diction and understanding when used in communication. Without having a sufficient vocabulary, one cannot

communicate effectively or express their ideas in both oral and written form. Having limited vocabulary is also a barrier that precludes learners from learning a language. Language teachers, therefore should possess considerable knowledge on how to manage an interesting classroom so that the learners can gain great success in their vocabulary learning. Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.

Fluency

Fluency can be defined the ability to speak or write a foreign language easily and accurately. Fluency in speaking is the aim of many language learners. Signs of fluency include a reasonably fast speed of speaking and only a small number of pauses and “ums” or “ers”. These signs indicate that the speaker does not have to spend a lot of time searching for the language items needed to express the message (Brown, 1997).

2.6. Teaching speaking to young learners

It is a challenge for teachers to teach speaking to young language learners (YLLs). First, YLLs are in the early age and they are interested in learning many new things such as a foreign language. According to McKay (2006) young learners seem to have the same proficiency in speaking, which is the novice level. He also states that the characteristic of novice level is the students’ ability to communicate minimally with learned material and oral production, which consists of isolated words and perhaps a few high-frequency phrases essentially no functional communication ability.

3. RELATED STUDIES

Some previous studies have investigated the effects of the TPR method and other techniques in teaching English vocabulary.

Fan-Ray Kuo, Chi-Chih Hsu, and Wei-Chieh Fang, Nian-Shing Chen (2013) investigated the Embodiment-based TPR approach on student English vocabulary learning achievement, retention and acceptance. This study proposed an integration of motion-sensing technology and theory of embodied cognition into the total physical response (TPR) approach, called Embodiment-based TPR approach. To test the effectiveness of the proposed approach, a total of 50 fifth-grade elementary students participated in this study. The experimental group adopted the Embodiment-based TRP learning approach, while the control group took part in a conventional TPR learning approach. Cognitive performance and acceptance feedback for the proposed approach were collected in the experiment. Results showed that both the post-test and the delay test concerning English vocabulary learning performance between the two groups had no significant difference. However, the result of learning retention showed a significant regression for the control group while the experimental group’s learning retention was retained, which implies the Embodiment-based TPR approach could bring better learning retention than the conventional TPR approach. In addition, experimental group showed a highly positive level of acceptance toward the proposed learning approach.

Moreover, Sasan Washang (2013) investigated the boosting vocabulary retention through adding a video component to the vocabulary building classes in English for specific purpose situations. The 46 participants of the study were chosen from among the first-year students of management based on their performance in the language section of the national exam for entering state universities in Iran, aka Konkoor; all of them scoring 35 to 40 out of 100. They were then divided into 2 groups randomly. Both groups attended classes for reading texts related to port management with special focus on the new vocabulary. The first class was treated with only texts

and exercises. The second class was treated with the same texts and exercises with the addition of selected videos with the length of around 10 minutes, also related to port management and specially selected to contain and discuss the same vocabulary. At the end of the classes, which lasted 16 weeks, 2 tests were administered to measure the students' level of word retention; one immediately after the end of the week 16 and the other 3 months after the first test. The results showed the second group performed significantly better in both tests.

Besides, Sühendan Er (2012) investigated the effects of Total Physical Response Method in Early Childhood Foreign Language Teaching Environments. The participants in this study were not mentioned. There were no texts in the teaching environment, so the classroom objects can be used easily but there was teaching via songs, games, stories accompany actions which attracted the attention of young active learners. In this paper, the positive sides of using TPR in foreign language classrooms for young learners are discussed and some sample activities are introduced. This study found that TPR was said to be the most effective technique which could be used in foreign language classrooms for young learners.

Jack Burston (2011) conducted a research project to reexamine the effectiveness of vocabulary learning via mobile phones. The participants of this study consisted of 78 students aged from 18 to 22 from one of China's key universities located in a metropolitan city in North China. They were assigned to two groups: the SMS group (the experimental group) and the paper group (the control group). Then, they were administered a pretest to identify the level of their prior vocabulary knowledge. The results revealed that there was no significant difference between the SMS group and the paper group. Next, they were put into two intervention conditions. The SMS group studied a selected list of vocabulary via mobile phone SMS text messages while the paper group worked on the same list of vocabulary through paper material in a self-regulated manner. Results showed that there was a significant difference in the posttests but not in the delayed tests between the two groups. The study concludes that vocabulary learning through these two methods is effective in their own way and that a blended approach to vocabulary learning may better help increase the effectiveness from the perspective of sustained retention rates.

Nugrahaningsih (2007) investigated the use of Total Physical Response (TPR) method in English Preposition Teaching. The participants of this study were 33 students of the fifth-grade students of the academic year 2006/2007 in Tajuk I Getasan Kab Semarang. Because the population was limited, the researcher took all the students as a sample in her experiment. She used a quasi-experiment using pre-test and post-test. There were four meetings during the experimentation. Before the experiment was conducted, the students were given a pre-test. At the end of the experiment, the students were given a post-test. By comparing the post-test scores and the pre-test scores, the researcher got the significant difference of the result. The result of the study showed that the students' progress in mastering English preposition during the teaching learning activity by using Total Physical Response method was good. The students' achievement in English preposition improved.

Laura, H. (2012) investigated the effectiveness of Total Physical Response Storytelling for language learning with special education students. The purpose of this exploratory research was to ascertain the validity of the Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS) language learning method in comparison with "traditional" language learning methods. The participants of this research consisted of 44 high school students in grades 9-12 with mild learning disabilities such as specific learning disorder, other health impairment, communication impairment, and multiple disabilities. This study followed an experimental design with a control group. The four classes were divided into two groups: a control and treatment group. Each group consisted of ten to twelve students. The results

from this study vary from class to class, as to the advantage of having material taught using TPRS techniques.

Maria Elena Muñoz (2011) investigated the impact of the TPR method in the teaching of English vocabulary to children. The study was conducted at “Gamma school”, an urban public school located in the Unidad residencial Gamma II. 32 participants (14 females and 18 males) were the third-grade students with low language proficiency. However, 6 students were observed carefully to collect the data. It was a case study. This study used observations, journals, field notes and video recordings for data collection. The findings of this study showed that the TPR method to introduce English vocabulary to third graders at Gamma school was beneficial and effective. It was very suitable for children aged 8-11. The students were interested to participate in the activities via using of the TPR method through the video recordings; also, they felt freely involved in the learning process. Besides, the TPR method increased the cooperation and self-confidence of students regardless of their quickness to grasp meanings and listening is the main skill developed through the TPR method. This study limited on investigating only 6 students, so it is necessary to conduct a research study with a larger number of participants.

Ice Sariyati (2013) conducted a research project on the effectiveness of TPR (Total Physical Response) Method in English Vocabulary Mastery of Elementary School Children and how the students respond toward teaching English vocabulary using TPR method. The participants of this research were 42 elementary school children in the first class. They were divided into 2 groups randomly. Group A (21 students) as control group and group B (21 students) as experiment group in one Islamic elementary school in Bandung. This research used quasi-experimental design to find out whether the TPR method was effective in English vocabulary mastery of elementary school children with two groups (control and experiment). Pre-test and post-test were used in this study to find out whether the TPR method was effective in English vocabulary mastery of elementary school children. Besides, observation was used to know the students’ response toward the TPR method in the experiment class. The result of the research showed that the TPR was effective and suitable to be used for elementary school children to learn English, especially English vocabulary and they felt happier and easier when learning with TPR method. However, quite a few students were frequently over acting when performing the commands. Besides, there were still a few students who were less enthusiastic, less nimble and shy. This study limited on investigating students’ vocabulary, not speaking skills.

4. CONCLUSION

The majority of research on language learning methods supports using various learning strategies for learning vocabulary, but developing speaking skill. There is also a great deal of research that supports Asher’s TPR method. Also, most of previous research on language acquisition has focused on students aged 8-17. There are few investigations on foreign language learning with elementary students who start learning a foreign language at very early age. It still leaves questions as to which learning technique is the most appropriate for their age group. In addition, it is still to be determined, which method best works with this population so that educators can make more effective decisions regarding language acquisition for students aged 5-9. That is why this research article focuses on effective ways to help young learners to remember vocabulary and speak fluently and provides. Further studies would be conducted using TPR to create an active and friendly atmosphere in the classroom in order to make the young learners remember vocabulary in long-term and enhance their speaking fluency. Besides, due to the importance of TPR in language teaching for very young learners, further study should explore the attitudes of young learners when TPR is used in language

teaching in EFL classrooms in Vietnam so that deeper understanding of learners would be obtained to make it more effective. Hopefully, this study would contribute to the body of knowledge as future references for ESL teachers, so they can plan and use TPR as a powerful language tool to help their pupils.

Biodata

Ngo Thi Cam Anh has over eight years teaching experience as a qualified and dedicated English language teacher. Currently she teaches at Victory Informatics Foreign Language Center of Tra Vinh University, where students range from very young learners to teenagers and adults. She is passionate about passing on her love for learning English and motivating young learners. She is interested in engaging and encouraging other teachers by sharing with them new ways to motivate their students in learning a foreign language.

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