

The use of Total Physical Response as a Classroom Management Strategy

Fayeqa Abdul Hussain Sakhaweti

Fayeqa Abdul Hussain Sakhaweti graduated from the B.Ed program at Sharjah Women's College in June 2004, and is teaching in Al Andalus School in Sharjah.

Introduction

During my school internship in the final semester of my B.Ed studies, I decided to investigate the use of Total Physical Response (TPR) activities to manage my class, because of some of the problems that I faced with classroom management. According to Slattery and Willis (2001), Total Physical Response is a particularly suitable strategy to use with young learners. The TPR method was first developed by Asher, who stated that “We learn better when our muscles are involved as well as our minds” (cited in Freeman and Freeman, 1998, p. 17). Total Physical Response involves the whole human body in the learning process.

I conducted my research in an elementary boys’ school in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. It is one of the oldest schools in the city, and there have been many changes made to the school in terms of reconstructing the building over the years. The students and teachers in this school are from different Arab countries, as well as from the UAE. There are around four hundred and fifty students in the school. The learning environment represents Emirati culture and traditions; however, on special occasions there are some activities that introduce the children to other cultures. During my internship, I taught Grade Five students who used the English for the Emirates course book. There were twenty three students in each classroom, and for my research, the participants were a group of five students within one of the classes that I taught.

For young children, physical activities are very important because they like to do things, more than they like listening and reading. As I noticed during my teaching practice placements in some schools in the UAE, English language teachers depend basically on presenting information, asking questions, and asking students to read. The lessons are mostly teacher-centered, and they do not give the students the practice they needed to learn the language. I have worked with boys a lot during school placements, and I have noticed that they are attracted more to physical activities, which easily get their attention and promote interaction with each other. I believe that physical response is a very important way of responding to language.

Therefore for my research, I developed the following research questions regarding the use of Total Physical Response activities in the English language classroom:

- o How do children respond to TPR activities?
- o What are some of the strategies that can be used for managing children in the classroom when following TPR methods?
- o How suitable is TPR for use with students in government schools in the UAE?

Literature Review

The use of TPR in the language classroom has different dimensions, and it can be used for different purposes. It is a very useful method for teachers who believe that students’ enjoyment during the lesson is very important and who also believe that students need

to be taught in different ways to meet the differences in their learning styles. Learning styles reflect the different ways in which people learn, and it varies among people. For example, in the UAE, students might be more used to learning by doing as their families taught them; they are kinesthetic learners and TPR is effective with them. In the same way that TPR is related to the different learning styles, it is also related to the theory of Multiple Intelligences that was introduced by Howard Gardner (1993; 1999). One of the seven intelligences that are included in his theory is bodily- kinesthetic intelligence, which involves the use of fine and motor skills to solve problems and to perform a sequence of movements.

A benefit of TPR is that it increases students' motivation during lessons. Children get bored easily, especially boys who like being active in the classroom. As TPR involves getting children to move a lot, it enhances their motivation. In terms of the teaching of language, teachers basically depend on commands when following TPR. Freeman and Freeman in their book, *ESL/EFL Teaching: Principles for Success* (1998), point out that "the reliance on commands ensures the active involvement of students" (Freeman and Freeman, p. 18). The second reason is that "In English, the verb forms used for commands are in simple form" (Freeman and Freeman, p. 18), which simplifies things for students because they would not have to think about the changes in tense or other difficult verb forms (Freeman and Freeman, p. 18).

Since I wanted to focus on using TPR as a classroom management method to settle down the students during the class, there are different TPR strategies that can be followed for this purpose. For example, "follow the teacher" is one of the "most basic TPR activities when children copy the teacher" (Slattery & Willis, p. 24). There are also other strategies like asking the students to suddenly clap their hands, or point to objects in the classroom, or even asking them to stand up and do some movements between the different stages of the lesson. These are all effective TPR strategies for getting back their attention and keeping them settled. As the focus of this research is specifically on the use of TPR to enhance classroom management, Slattery and Willis's statement that TPR can be used to "wake children up if they are feeling sleepy, or let children have a break when they have been concentrating on another activity" (Slattery & Willis, p. 24) is an important consideration.

Teaching Strategy

During my Internship, I used some of these strategies mentioned in the literature. In addition, I also included a wide range of physical activities within the content of my lessons. To meet the need of students who are kinesthetic learners, I implemented activities like 'Simon Says' where the students do the actions that the teacher says. I also implemented some physical response activities within the lessons: for example, matching activities using sentence strips, drawing, cutting and pasting and making mini books which all require hands-on activity. When the students were learning about jobs, I had pictures of people doing different jobs and the names of the jobs. The students had to cut out each picture with the correct word related to it, for example, a picture of a nurse would go with the word 'nurse'. Then they had to cut them out and stick them in their mini books, which were A4 papers that they folded.

Methodology

Cohen and Manion, in Bell (1999), describe Action Research as “essentially an on-the-spot procedure designed to deal with concrete problems in an immediate situation” (Bell, p. 8). To take this definition a stage further, Elliott in Bell (1999), notes that Action Research “aims to feed practical judgment in concrete situations, and the validity of the ‘theories’ or hypotheses it generates depend no so much on ‘scientific’ tests of truth, as on their usefulness in helping people to act more intelligently and skillfully” (Bell. p. 9).

I chose this type of research because I wanted to focus on an action that I could take in a specific aspect of my classroom teaching, collect data about it, and then analyze the data. I used several different methods of collecting data about the effectiveness of my use of TPR as a classroom management strategy. As there was not enough time for me to take ongoing observation notes during the class when students were involved in TPR activities, I decided to write reflections directly after the class. Those reflections were written according to specific guiding questions which helped me reflect on the students’ reactions to the TPR activities. Such observation “enables researchers to document and reflect systematically upon classroom interactions and events, as they actually occur” (Burns, p. 80).

In addition, I decided to give a questionnaire to my mentor college teachers after they attended my classroom and observed my use of TPR with the students. I chose this type of data collection tool because questionnaires “allow the teacher researcher to collect large amounts of data in a relatively short amount of time” (Burns, p. 63). The third data collection tool that I used in my research was one-on-one interviews with students. I had a set of questions that I asked the students individually. Interviews are “face-to-face personal interactions which generate data about the research issue and allow specific issues to be discussed from other people’s perspectives” (Burns, p. 117). I chose interviews as one of my data collections tools because, as mentioned in Mills (2003), an interview “allows the teacher to ask all of the participants the same series of questions” (p. 59).

Informing participants is an important aspect of teacher research, and the teacher researcher needs to discuss the research features with school administrators. In conducting this research, I followed this procedure, and I also informed the people whom I interviewed and to whom I gave questionnaires. Mills (2003) suggests some ways of informing participants, such as gathering the group of students who will be interviewed and giving them an explanation of what their role will be and why this research is being done, and I also did this.

Data Analysis

In order to answer my first research question - about the learners’ response to TPR activities - I found that the students responded well to the TPR activities that I implemented. For example, when the students were learning about the language used in restaurants, I had the students doing some role-plays where they worked in groups and one of them became the waiter who took the orders from the others; the waiter would stand up with a towel on his arm and checklist of the food to tick off, while the

other members of the group sat down with menus in front of them and the course book to guide their language when they ordered the food. I found that the students were effectively using the language. They were all involved in the activity and wanted a turn to be the waiters. This activity showed the students' positive response to TPR.

Comparing the above example to the traditional way of presenting this topic shows the big difference in the students' responses. As I learned from observing lessons with other English teachers in the school, this activity is usually introduced by asking two students to stand up and read the dialogue from the course book where the other students in the class listen to them. I noticed that the rest of the students grew bored, and they did not pay attention to their peers who were reading. However, when I implemented the role-play, all the students were involved and interested too.

My aim in using TPR was not only to keep the students active, but also to encourage them to enjoy the lesson and increase their interest in learning English. I planned the activities by first considering the students' interests, because I believe that if the students were interested and enjoyed the activities, TPR would work very well with them. One of the activities that I mentioned before, the opposites game is a very good example of that. As I was using a ball for this activity, a football in particular, the students were really interested especially because the boys in this context were fond of football. However, one time when I was doing this activity with the students, one of them hit another with the football on his head. A football is a relatively hard ball, and since I noticed that the students were still acting a bit violently, I decided to move from using a hard ball to a soft ball. The students said that they had fun doing TPR activities, and each of them mentioned this as the activity that he enjoyed most.

In answering my questionnaire, both of my mentor teachers agreed that TPR was suitable for students in government schools. Besides, as one of the participants attended and observed more lessons, she added that TPR activities were not just suitable for the students' age, but were also suitable for the environment they were in, and their gender. To expand on the particular environment of the school, it also had much older boys who were between fifteen and seventeen years old and who were therefore very old for their grade, which was Grade Five. Also, the school was a tough one, and nothing was done seriously to deal with those boys. Nevertheless, I noticed that some of the TPR activities that I implemented were suitable and involved those specific boys.

I also observed that the activities were suitable for the students in this country because they were very active and showed enthusiasm for moving around in the classroom, and TPR was a way for them to channel this into something that is both useful and enjoyable at the same time. This was evident in activities such as reordering sentences on the board. I had sentences of a story on large sentence strips on the board which the students had to reorder in pairs to re-create the story. In this activity, the students really showed interest especially, I think, because those activities were a bit challenging for them and they were, in a way, competing with each other to get the story reordered correctly.

One of the obstacles that I faced was the classroom setting. The students were not seated in groups most of the time, and the classroom space was not very suitable for large group activities, therefore I planned and used activities that did not require a lot of

moving around the classroom although they kept the students active. This way of planning helped me in implementing TPR in a way that was more suitable for the setting and environment of the school and classrooms.

Since boys are naturally active participants, they were also very active in the classroom. During my internship, I came to the conclusion that most of the boys were bodily kinesthetic intelligent which involves, as I mentioned in my literature review, the use of fine and motor skills to solve problems and perform a sequence of movements (McGrath & Nobel, p. 8). They enjoyed these activities, and they gave their best performance when they were presenting the language through physical activities.

During my internship, I used the boys' bodily-kinesthetic intelligence to increase a positive environment in the classroom through TPR activities. In contrast, I observed that the teachers in the school were using the traditional 'verbal response' as their main method. I realized that this total use of verbal responses could limit the boys' performance in the classroom, as well as making them bored during the lesson. However, I used 'verbal responses' only as part of some of the TPR activities that I implemented. Since, as I mentioned before, the boys were kinesthetic learners who succeed more when they are doing what they are learning, and who like to work with their hands instead of sitting and simply listening, reading or writing, the use of TPR activities was very successful with them, because it matched their interests and encouraged them to stay focused. This also reduced the classroom management problems that would normally arise.

I found overall that TPR worked very well as a classroom management strategy. One reason for that is the extent of the students' involvement in the activities. Since the students were very busy listening to my instructions and taking part in the activities, they tended to forget about wandering around the class without any reason, as they usually did. Although it may seem contradictory, having students active for most of the time reduced the noise level in the classroom. It also reduced the management problems that would arise in the class. Since I used some of the TPR activities as the warm up for the lesson, the students were focused right from at the beginning and I got their attention easily.

Some other times, I employed TPR in the middle of the lesson, which was a good break for the students and a relaxing time as well as a refocusing of energy for them. Even if it did not last for more than few minutes, this got their attention and stopped them from thinking about being noisy or chatting with their friends.

Conclusion

TPR is a successful classroom management tool that teachers can easily implement at any stage of their lessons, or once they face a management problem. Although I only implemented TPR with one grade level, I still hold the belief that it could be used with other grade levels, because children, in general, are active; and boys particularly so, and they like to have fun in the classroom. Furthermore, as I mentioned in my literature review section, Slattery and Willis (2001) state that TPR can be used to "wake children up if they are feeling sleepy, or let children have a break when they have been concentrating on another activity" (Slattery & Willis, p. 24). This suggests that there is

no age limit for the use of TPR with children.

I make the following recommendations based on what I found in the school during my Internship:

- o My research could provide an introduction to some Professional Development sessions for teachers and managers in schools to convince them about the importance of TPR in the classroom, and to give them some strategies and methods that they can use with their students.

- o I believe that to really explore the use of TPR, there should be more research done in this area, especially about the ways in which people learn which is strongly linked to the different learning styles, and what strategies would be the best choice for use in the UAE context.

Different aspects of this research have come together to show that Total Physical Response can be used as a positive classroom management technique in the UAE context. Research such as this is important because in the Gulf region there hasn't been so much classroom-based research on the use of TPR. In this way I hope that the conclusions of my research become a supportive tool for the development of teaching and learning in the Gulf.

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