



The Implementation of Total Physical Response Method in Teaching English Language in Libyan Primary Schools in Al-Marj Region

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تطبيق أسلوب الاستجابة الجسدية الشاملة في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في المدارس الابتدائية الليبية بمنطقة المرج

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Abstract

This study investigated the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in teaching English to 1st, 2nd, and 3rd-grade primary school students in Al-Marj city, Libya, during the 2023/2024 academic year. It aimed to determine if English language teachers implement TPR in classrooms, understand its principles, and if course books include TPR-based lessons. Using classroom observations and interviews, the study gathered data from English language teachers across five public primary schools in Al-Marj. Findings revealed that the majority of teachers (13 out of 14) were unfamiliar with TPR principles and largely disregarded TPR-based lessons in their teaching. Only one teacher demonstrated familiarity with TPR and its practical application. Furthermore, the course books were found to offer insufficient space for TPR activities. This study recommends professional development workshops and training programs for teachers to enhance their performance in teaching young learners. It also advises curriculum planners to integrate TPR more effectively into the English language curriculum for young learners.

Keywords: Total Physical Response (TPR), Young Learners (YL), English Language Teaching (ELT).

المخلص

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى تقصي تطبيق طريقة الاستجابة الجسدية الكلية (TPR) في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية لطلاب الصفوف الأول والثاني والثالث بالمرحلة الابتدائية في مدينة المرج، ليبيا، خلال العام الدراسي 2024/2023. سعت الدراسة للإجابة على ما إذا كان معلمو اللغة الإنجليزية يطبقون طريقة TPR في الفصول الدراسية، وما إذا كانوا يعرفون مبادئها، وما إذا كانت الكتب الدراسية المستخدمة تحتوي على دروس تستند إلى هذه الطريقة. لجمع البيانات، استخدم الباحثون الملاحظات الصفية والمقابلات. تكون مجتمع الدراسة من معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في خمس مدارس ابتدائية حكومية بمدينة المرج. أشارت النتائج إلى أن غالبية المعلمين ليس لديهم فكرة عن طريقة TPR ومبادئها، وأن معظمهم يتجاهلون الدروس القائمة عليها. من بين المعلمين العدة، كانت معلمة واحدة فقط هي الملمة بـ TPR وتطبيقها في الفصول الدراسية. كما وجدت الدراسة أن الكتب الدراسية المستخدمة من قبل المعلمين لا توفر مساحات كافية لأنشطة TPR. بناءً على هذه النتائج، توصي الدراسة بتنفيذ ورش عمل وبرامج تدريبية لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية للمتعلمين الصغار لمساعدتهم على تحسين

وتطوير أدائهم. كما توصي بضرورة أن يأخذ مخطوط المناهج الدراسية أهمية طريقة TPR في الاعتبار عند تدريس المتعلمين الصغار.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستجابة الجسدية الكلية (TPR)، المتعلمون الصغار (YL)، تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية (ELT).

Introduction

The global landscape underscores the increasing importance of early English language education, shaping future communication and academic opportunities for young learners. However, teaching English to young learners presents distinct challenges compared to instructing adults, primarily due to their differing cognitive, emotional, and social characteristics. Young learners, typically characterized by short attention spans, can easily become bored and lose interest quickly. Their learning is often deeply rooted in visual and auditory input, relying heavily on what they see and hear. As Slattery and Willis (2001) aptly note, "young learners are developing quickly as individuals, learn in a variety of ways, for instance, watching, listening, imitating or doing things. They love to play, use their imagination and enjoy repetition" (p. 23). Their comprehension is significantly aided by sensory input, hearing, touch, and vision, with intonation, gestures, facial expressions, and actions all playing crucial roles in conveying the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases.

To effectively engage these learners, a variety of pedagogical approaches can be employed. Among these, the Total Physical Response (TPR) method stands out as a highly effective technique for the young learner classroom. Developed by Dr. James Asher, a professor of psychology at San Jose State University in the late 1960s in America, TPR is a language teaching method built on the coordination of speech and physical action. It posits that language can be learned through a series of commands to which learners respond with physical movements. In a TPR classroom, the teacher acts as an instructor and action monitor, while learners serve as action performers, initially not expected to speak but rather to demonstrate comprehension through physical responses. Asher's foundational belief is that second language acquisition mirrors first language development, which typically involves an extended period of listening and comprehension before active production. This aligns with Pinter's (2006) assertion that, "Just as mother tongue learning, English should start with emphasis on listening and then speaking" (p. 15). The theoretical underpinnings of TPR are rooted in Stephen Krashen's Comprehension Approach, which suggests that language is acquired naturally rather than consciously learned. For Asher, learning a target language should emulate the natural process of acquiring one's first language.

Despite the well-documented benefits and theoretical foundations of the TPR method for young learners, its implementation and understanding among English language teachers in specific contexts, such as primary schools in Al-Marj city, Libya, remain largely unexplored. This research aims to address this gap by investigating the current practices related to the TPR method in the specified region.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Do English language teachers implement the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in their classrooms?
2. Do English language teachers understand the core principles of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method?
3. Do the course books currently used by English language teachers contain lessons that are explicitly based on the Total Physical Response (TPR) method?

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant implications for various stakeholders in English language education in Libya. By assessing the current state of TPR implementation and teacher knowledge, it can inform targeted professional development programs and workshops designed to enhance teaching methodologies for young learners. Furthermore, the findings will provide valuable insights for curriculum planners and developers, guiding them in the creation of more effective and age-appropriate English language curricula that integrate proven methods like TPR. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader understanding of effective language pedagogy in the Libyan context, potentially leading to improved learning outcomes for primary school students.

What is TPR?

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a language teaching method fundamentally built upon the coordination of speech and physical action. It represents a learning style structured around the synergy of commands, speech, and movement, aiming to facilitate language acquisition through physical engagement. As articulated by Slattery and Willis (2001), TPR involves children listening to and following a sequence of instructions, actively performing what the teacher says (p. 23). This method serves as an effective entry point for using English in classroom communication.

More specifically, TPR focuses on teaching listening comprehension through a series of commands to which students respond with physical movement. Learners are not typically expected to speak while performing these actions; instead, they are given ample time to process and internalize the language before feeling ready to produce it orally. Imssalem (2001) highlights that in Asher's techniques, students maintain silence in the initial stages, but are required to execute specific actions in response to the teacher's commands in the target language (p. 219). Asher (1965) further explains that after a period of silent listening to the instructor and performing actions, which signifies understanding the meaning, children naturally begin to speak and reproduce the target language.

The theoretical underpinnings of TPR are closely linked to theories of first language acquisition, positing that language is acquired naturally rather than through explicit learning. Lightbown and Spada (1993) connect this directly to Stephen Krashen's approach, particularly his hypothesis emphasizing comprehensible input as a crucial requirement for second language acquisition (p. 89). The TPR method is grounded in three core hypotheses: first, that language is learned primarily through listening; second, that language learning should actively engage the right hemisphere of the brain; and third, that the learning process should be free from stress.

The Learner's Role

In the TPR method, learners assume the dual role of listener and performer. They are expected to listen attentively to commands given by the teacher and respond physically, either individually or in unison. Speaking is encouraged only when learners feel prepared and confident. According to Slattery and Willis (2001), students must listen carefully to instructions, enjoy performing the actions, can execute actions collectively or independently, are not obligated to speak (though they often do), and comprehend the language because movement and language are intrinsically linked (p. 24).

The Teacher's Role

The teacher plays a highly active and central role in the TPR classroom. They act as the primary instructor, serving as the main source of linguistic input for students by presenting material and organizing class activities. The teacher facilitates exposure to the target language predominantly through the use of commands. Slattery and Willis (2001) describe the teacher's responsibilities as instructing pupils on what to do, utilizing clear pronunciation and natural intonation, and aiding comprehension through gestures or by physically demonstrating the actions themselves (p. 24).

TPR Procedures

The majority of class time in TPR lessons is dedicated to a series of teacher-led commands, which are repeated until the class has internalized them. Students respond to these commands with corresponding physical actions. Initially, students acquire the meaning of the commands they hear through direct observation. Er (2013) notes that during the first few weeks of introducing English via TPR, students are not expected to speak, but rather to observe and respond non-verbally. After several repetitions, this can be extended by asking students to repeat the words as they perform the actions.

Lightbown and Spada (1993) describe how, in TPR classes, participants, whether children or adults, engage in activities where they hear a sequence of commands in the target language, such as 'Stand up,' 'Sit down,' or 'Pick up the book' (p. 90). They further clarify that students are not obligated to verbalize anything; their comprehension is solely demonstrated through their actions (p. 90). In subsequent stages, the teacher issues commands without performing the action, and students respond independently. The students' actions serve as immediate feedback for the teacher, indicating their level of understanding. As confidence grows, some students may even feel ready to issue commands themselves, with the class and teacher responding with actions. This technique effectively mimics the natural way children acquire their first language from their parents. Frost (2007) explains that in the classroom, the teacher assumes a parental role, initiating instruction by speaking a word or phrase and simultaneously demonstrating an action. Errors made by students are considered a natural part of the learning process, often overlooked, and should typically not be corrected until learners achieve greater proficiency (Savic, 2014).

Teaching Material

There is no prescribed basic textbook for a TPR course. Initially, the teacher's voice, actions, mimicry, and gestures may suffice as the primary basis for classroom activities. As learners progress, teachers can integrate classroom objects like books, pens, and furniture. TPR lessons commonly utilize a wide array of realia, posters, and props. Lessons in TPR are typically structured around vocabulary, with particular emphasis on verbs and imperative classroom language. Cook (n.d.) states that the vocabulary and structures to which learners are exposed are carefully graded and organized, ensuring that the material gradually increases in complexity, with each new lesson building upon the previous one (p. 90). The fundamental focus in TPR lessons is on meaning over form, with students expected to acquire grammatical structures naturally through exposure to spoken language input. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), TPR classes do not primarily focus on grammar but rather on the

functional use of language through words, simple phrases, and sentences in daily communication. Diaz (2005) supports this, stating, "you didn't need to learn grammar of your native language in order to speak it; you learned these structures unconsciously as you learn to speak it."

It is important to note that, like any method, TPR is not designed to be used in isolation but should be integrated with other techniques and methods within the classroom. Er (2013) confirms that many teachers successfully combine TPR with other approaches rather than relying solely on it. TPR is particularly effective for teaching body vocabulary, prepositions, and directional language, and is especially suitable for low-level learners.

TPR Activities

Activities within the TPR method are primarily based on imperative drills. Learners engage as listeners and performers, attentively responding physically to commands issued by the teacher. Philips (1993) identifies TPR activities as beneficial for enhancing foreign language learning (p. 7). While TPR activities demand significant energy from teachers, they generally require less preparation time.

These activities are highly effective for kinesthetic learners who benefit from active participation. TPR activities are widely regarded as interesting, challenging, motivating, and stress-reducing, making them enjoyable for most students. Savic (2014) emphasizes that using TPR activities in language instruction creates conditions similar to first language acquisition, effectively reducing stress and engaging children affectively through physical action. The requirement for students to respond to listening cues with physical actions allows teachers to gauge student comprehension. Slattery and Willis (2001) suggest "Follow the Leader" as an excellent TPR activity for young English language learners, noting its fun nature and immediate visual and kinesthetic feedback (p. 24). Pinter (2006) adds that in such activities, children must listen and comprehend messages, decide whether their understanding is correct, and then act accordingly (p. 50). Popular TPR activities include direct commands, "Simon Says," storytelling with actions, and group singing with corresponding movements.

Benefits of TPR

The Total Physical Response method offers numerous advantages for language acquisition:

- It is engaging and enjoyable for students, making learning fun and easy.
- It aids memory, helping students recall phrases and words effectively.
- It fosters student collaboration, confidence, and motivation.
- It creates a positive learning environment for students.
- Students can visibly demonstrate their understanding through actions.
- It facilitates the development of new vocabulary through the use of commands.
- It engages both the left and right hemispheres of the brain, promoting holistic learning.
- Students are not pressured to speak until they feel ready, reducing anxiety.
- It establishes a stress-free learning environment.
- It mirrors the natural process of first language acquisition.
- It proves highly effective with teenagers and young learners.
- It requires minimal preparation or specialized materials.
- It works well with mixed-ability classes and is suitable for both small and large groups.
- It is particularly beneficial for kinesthetic and visual learners.
- Students use the language in meaningful contexts without feeling pressure to perform linguistically before they are ready.

Here is the rewritten "Research Methodology" and the introductory part of "Findings" sections, incorporating the suggested improvements for academic rigor, clarity, and structure.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in teaching English to young learners at primary schools in Al-Marj, Libya. A qualitative design was chosen to allow for an in-depth understanding of teachers' practices, perceptions, and the contextual factors influencing TPR use through direct observation and detailed interviews.

Participants

The participants in this research comprised 14 English language teachers from five public primary schools in Al-Marj, Libya. These teachers were responsible for instructing 1st, 2nd, and 3rd-grade students. A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to select these schools and teachers, focusing on those actively engaged in teaching English to young learners in the specified region to gain relevant and rich insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection Procedures

Data for this study were collected primarily through two qualitative methods: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews.

Classroom Observations: The researchers acted as non-participant observers during classroom observations conducted across the five primary schools in Al-Marj city. The observations focused on identifying instances of TPR method application during the teaching process, noting how teachers integrated or neglected TPR-based lessons and activities. The primary purpose of these observations was to ascertain the extent to which the TPR method was being implemented in the classrooms.

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each of the 14 participating teachers, all of whom were female. These interviews took place during break times to minimize disruption to the school schedule. The interview questions were designed to align directly with the study's research questions, aiming to elicit teachers' knowledge of TPR principles, their perceptions regarding its effectiveness, and their reasons for its implementation or non-implementation.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from classroom observations and teacher interviews were subjected to thematic analysis. This involved a systematic process of reading through the transcribed interview data and observation notes, identifying recurring themes and patterns related to TPR implementation, teacher knowledge, and curriculum content. Data from observations were triangulated with interview data to enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the findings, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant educational authorities and the participating schools. All participating teachers provided informed consent, acknowledging their voluntary participation and understanding of the study's objectives and procedures. Measures were taken to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants; all teacher responses were anonymized (e.g., T1, T2) to protect their identities. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Findings

This section presents the results derived from the data analysis, offering insights into the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in English language teaching across the five primary schools in Al-Marj city, as well as evaluating the extent to which course books incorporate TPR activities.

Teachers' Implementation of TPR

This section explains the results of the data analysis, conducted by researchers to describe the implementation of the TPR method in teaching English at 5 primary schools in Al-Marj city and also to find out whether the course book is based on TPR activities or not. There are 14 teachers in this research. To make it easier to mentioning the teachers, the researchers named the first teacher as T1, the second as T2 and the third as T3 and so on.

Table 1: explains the use of the TPR method by the teachers.

	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	T11	T12	T13	T14
In lessons			✓											
In the classroom instructions		✓	✓				✓			✓				✓
Ignored completely				✓		✓					✓	✓		
Use traditional methods	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓

The table (1) shows that one teacher, T3, applied TPR method in the lessons and also used it in classroom instructions. (5) teachers used TPR in classroom instructions, (4) teachers ignored the lessons completely and moved to the next lesson, (9) teachers used the traditional methods with lessons that were based on TPR activities. The result of observation shows that only (T3) applied (TPR) principles; she used group singing activities where students were singing and moving their bodies. She also used (TPR) principles in classroom instructions such as Stand up, sit down, Clean the board, open your book, Close the door. Etc. The observation of this class indicates that students were happy and enjoyed these activities, also T2, T7, T10 and T14 used (TPR) principles in classroom instructions and used traditional methods with lessons based on (TPR) activities. T4, T6, T11 and T12 ignored the lessons completely and moved to the next lesson, T1. T2, T5, T7, T8, T9, T10, T13 and T14, all of them applied the traditional method in the teaching process, where the teacher centered in the class and explains every point in detail, using the mother tongue while the students take notes.

Through the teaching process, the teacher wrote a list of words on the board, read them many times and the student repeated after her. She also asked students to memories them. The result of interviews indicated that, except one teacher, all the teachers who participated in this study had no idea about what's total physical response method means, until it was explained by the researcher. After explanation, some teachers don't have knowledge about it and also and how to apply in the classroom.

The other teachers know how to apply it, but they only use it in classroom instructions because of factors like time and class size.

Text book

The investigation of Libyan text book (English for Libya 1, 2 and 3 in academic year 2023-2024) indicated that English for Libya primary (1) pupils' book contains (9) units most of them concentrated on activities like Look, Listen and Say, Trace and Match, Say and Color, Listen and Draw. There is only lesson in unit (6) based on (TPR) activities. Listen, Say and Do.

English for Libya primary (2) pupil's book contains 8 units, the most units based on Listen and Say, Ask and Answer, look, Read and Say, Look and Find, Find and Write activities. There are not lessons depends on (TPR) method. There is lesson in unit 2 based on songs of body movement like (Put your hands up- Stamp your feet- Turn right- Turn left.... etc.), the text book depended on Look- Listen and Sing activities for this lesson.

The researcher think it will be more effective if it taught through the (TPR) method. English for Libya primary (3) pupils' book the most units based on Listen- Point and Say- Read and Match- Listen-Look and Tick- Read and Write- Ask and Answer activities. Academic year (2024-2025) there are edition of new lessons to text book depend on (TPR) method, but it still not enough.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigated the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in primary English language classrooms in Al-Marj, Libya. Our findings suggest that TPR is indeed an effective method for teaching English to young learners, fostering a positive classroom atmosphere where students grasp meaning through movement, aiding in easier word memorization. However, the study also revealed several challenges. A significant majority of teachers continue to rely on traditional teaching methods. Both observations and interviews indicated that most teachers lacked knowledge of TPR principles and how to apply them. This lack of understanding, coupled with some teachers ignoring TPR-based lessons or teaching them traditionally, highlights a clear need for professional development. Effective TPR implementation requires a deep understanding of its core principles and a commitment to creating interactive, engaging lessons. Furthermore, our analysis of the "English for Libya" textbooks showed a limited emphasis on the TPR method. Many existing lessons, such as those on colors, fruits, food, and body parts, could be more engaging and effective if taught using TPR, ultimately increasing learner motivation.

Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, we propose the following recommendations to enhance English language teaching for young learners in Libya:

- Professional Development for Teachers: English language teachers working with young learners should receive targeted professional development. This training should equip them with a strong understanding of language acquisition principles for this age group, practical teaching methodologies, and specific strategies for implementing TPR effectively in the classroom.
- Tailored Training Programs: We recommend developing and implementing specialized training programs and workshops for teachers in Libyan schools. These programs should address the unique challenges teachers face when working with young learners and provide practical solutions for integrating innovative teaching methods like TPR.
- Curriculum and Syllabus Reform: Syllabus designers should prioritize the integration of the TPR method in English language curricula for young learners. The curriculum should feature a greater number of lessons and activities explicitly designed around TPR principles, alongside other effective methodologies for this age group.

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