Research on the Application of Total Physical Response Approach to Vocabulary Teaching in Primary Schools

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Abstract

Traditional methods of vocabulary teaching overemphasize forms of vocabulary and grammar instead of word meanings (Jie Jingyuan, 1997), which contributes that students lose their interest in learning English. Total Physical Response (TPR), put forward by James Asher, is a language teaching approach which encourages people to combine language learning with physical actions. This paper explores the application of TPR approach to vocabulary teaching in primary schools by carrying out a teaching experiment. The results reveal that the experiment group has a better command of the vocabulary spelling than that of the control group and physical actions can stimulate students' interest in learning.

Key words: Total Physical Response Approach, vocabulary teaching, physical actions

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is considered as the brick of English language (Wu fei, 2012). Traditional approaches of vocabulary teaching lay stress on grammar instead of meanings. David Paul (2003:25) summarizes several problems emerging from English teaching in the book *Teaching English to Children in Asia*. First, class activities appear to be monotonous. Teachers tend to use the same teaching mode in each class. Students often get bored in class. Second, teachers overemphasize the grammar of vocabulary instead of the meaning itself. Third, the customary teacher-centered methods enjoy priority in English teaching. Students are asked to follow teachers' order or just repeat what teachers' saying. Since children are playful, hardly concentrate and lack of self-controlling, they can easily lose interest in learning English (Paul, 2003:49).What methods teachers should adopt to teach English effectively turns into a question.

Total Physical Response (TPR) holds that language learning should resort to physical actions (Asher, 2012). And it covers many teaching modes, including drawing, music, game, role play, competition, etc. Children are more likely to remember words which associate with a fun game, an interesting picture, a song, or an absurd situation. This thesis will discuss this approach and investigate the application of this approach in vocabulary teaching (Wang Li, 2008:186).

2. The Overview of TPR Approach

TPR, put forward by James Asher in 1960s, a professor of psychology at San Jose State University, California, is a language teaching method which originates from his observation (Asher, 2012). He noticed that interactions between parents and children often took the form of speech from a parent followed by a physical response from a kid. He also observed that children typically are not able to speak until they listen to language for a long time, and they can apprehend their parents' utterances and respond to them by physical movement (Asher, 2012). From this, he was able to make three hypotheses. First, language is learned primarily through listening. Second, language learning must engage right hemisphere of brain. Third, learning a language should not involve any stress. These assumptions led to his first experiment in 1965 with Japanese language. In 1969, Doctor Asher conducted more than 30 experiments. By observation and analysis of the process of Japanese and Russian teaching, he found that the applications of TPR approach in teaching can induce students' high-speed understanding. And during the process of doing exercises, students have chance to express themselves by means of physical actions. But Asher still thought that because of the critical property of the left brain, it is important for those who take a "watch-the-performance" attitude to participate in the performance and gradually make progress through doing actions. Asher attempted to find out the reasons why TPR could promote high-speed understanding and improve a good memory. He excluded some factors which might affect the effectiveness of TPR. These factors include location, which means the location of the teaching instruments in the room during exercise; interflow, which means the learner gets into action before he has finished listening to instructions; sequence, which means that the instruction may indicate what the latter one is (Asher, 1969:3). Finally, through the analysis of data, he drew the conclusion that learners' physical actions are the most important factor. In 1977, Asher released the Book: *Learning Another Language Through Actions* which contained the main tests for TPR.

2.1 Characteristics of TPR Approach

First, TPR approach does not require spoken output in the early stages of learning (Liu Xin, 2007:95). Students are not asked to speak until they acquire enough language knowledge through listening. So at the beginning students can respond to instructors in their native language.

Second, lessons in TPR particularly are organized around verbs. The word meaning is priority to grammar. Grammar is learned by induction instead of explicitly taught. Students are expected to subconsciously acquire grammatical structure of English language through exposure to spoken language input, in addition to decoding the messages in the input to find their meaning (Wu Fei, 2012:187).

2.2 Teaching Content of TPR Approach

2.2.1 Procedure of TPR

First, teachers give instruction and do physical actins accordingly. Students just need to listen and observe (Wang Yiming, 2004:49).

Second, teachers give instructions and do physical actions, and students do as what teachers have done.

Third, teachers give instructions without doing anything, and students do physical actions according to teachers' instructions.

Last, some students give instructions and other students complete physical actions alone or with the help of teachers (Hu Tieqiu, 2000:33).

The majority of class time in TPR lessons is spent doing drills in which instructors give commands by using the imperative mood. Students respond to these commands with physical actions. Apart from drills using the imperative, teachers can use other activities as well, such as role-plays, games, slide presentations, etc.

2.2.2 Teaching Models of TPR

Combination of TPR with Vocabulary

It's difficult for young learner to master the grammatical structure of a language. Teachers should be aware of this and apply TPR theory to students' vocabulary learning (Zhang Xuan, 2008:253). For instance, if teachers are teaching vocabulary: walk, run and stop, They can use physical actions to help students understand the meanings of these vocabulary.

Combination of TPR with Games

Children like playing games. In TPR lessons, teachers design distinct games which can stimulate students' interest and motivate them to learn effectively (Zhang Qin, 2006:112).

Combination of TPR with Drawing

Pictures can give students visual impression. Teachers can use drawing activities in class (Wu Fei, 2012: 183). For example, in review section, teachers require students to draw on the blackboard what the vocabulary stands for.

Combination of TPR with Music

Music always generates a kind of relaxing and ease envionment for learning. Teachers combine music with teaching content (Wu Fei, 2012: 183). Students can sing and dance with music. In this case, they can easily apprehend the meaning of teaching material.

Combination of TPR with Role Play

Children are good at performing. Teachers plan some scenes based on daily life in which let students to play their respective roles. Real situation can enhance students' memory for the new content (Wu Fei, 2012: 183).

3. Methodology and Research Questions

The experiment concerning the TPR will be conducted, aiming to find out the value of the application of the TPR approach to vocabulary teaching in primary schools.

3.1 Experiment Design

3.1.1 Subjects

The target students were in their third grade in Dong Da Central Primary school in Xi'an, Shaanxi, China. Forty students from two classes were chosen. Each class accounted for twenty. Their English ability was in the same level. It was the first time that they started learning English at the third grade. They were about eight years old. All of them were local. They were divided into two groups, including the experiment group and the control group. The experiment group used the TPR approach to learn vocabulary. The control group adopted the traditional teaching methods. The experiment lasted four weeks from March9, 2015 to April4, 2015. The teacher gave four lessons each week. Every class lasted forty minutes. Pretest and posttest were covered. The results of tests were collected and discussed in the end of the experiment.

3.1.2 Material

The text book used was the English Text Book of the Third Grade published by the People's Education Press. Twenty verbs and verb phrases totally were chosen. For example, fly, drive, climb, hug, jump, cheer, kick the ball, shake your hands, etc. The target students were in the third grade which was the first year they started to learn English, so verbs and verb phases chosen from this text book as the teaching material were not familiar to them.

3.1.3 Pretest

In order to learn the students' English ability, the pretest was conducted. There were ten questions totally in the pretest. Ten questions were divided into two types. Five questions belong to dictation. For another five questions, students were asked to write out the Chinese meanings of each word. Each question valued ten points. Then the teacher divided forty students into two groups based on the score of each student got so that the English level of each group was similar.

3.1.4 Posttest

The form of the posttest was the same as the pretest. The only difference was the test content. There were ten questions in the test. Each question was worth ten points. Ten questions were divided into two types. Five questions belong to dictation. For another five questions, students were asked to write out the meanings of vocabulary. For instance, the teacher read a word. Students were required to write out the word and the meaning of this word. The content of the posttest was based on the teaching material during the experiment. The results and data of this test were analyzed by the software SPSS20.0, in the form of the T-test.

3.2 Research Questions

This research attempts to answer two questions:

(1) How to apply the TPR approach to vocabulary teaching in primary schools?

(2) Does the experiment group have a better command of vocabulary than the control group?

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 The Results of Data Analysis of the Pretest

4.1.1 The Independent Sample T-Test of the Pretest of Both Groups

In order to know whether the English ability of the two groups is at the same level, the pretest was conducted. The specific data analysis is as follows:

T-Test

Group Statistic					
	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest Scores	EG	20	93.0000	5.71241	1.27733
	CG	20	92.5000	6.38666	1.42810

(Notes: EG= Experimental Group   CG= Control Group)

As this chart shows, the mean score of the two groups are different. Obviously the mean score of the EG is 93 which is higher than the CG which is about 92. It indicates little difference between the mean scores of EG and CG.

Independent-Sample T-test of the Pretest between EG & CG

Independent Sample Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Pretest Scores	Equal variances assumed	.128	.722	.261	38	.796	.50000
	Equal variances not assumed			.261	37.537	.796	.50000

Independent Sample Test

		t-test for Equality of Means		
		Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			Lower	Upper
Pretest Scores	Equal variances assumed	1.91600	-3.37874	4.37874
	Equal variances not assumed	1.91600	-3.38031	4.38031

As can be seen from the Independent-Sample T-Test analysis of the data, the statistical significance (sig.) of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances is 0.722(>0.05) and the Sig(2-tailed) is 0.796 (> 0.05), which means that there is no difference concerning the knowledge of vocabulary between two groups.

4.2 The Results of Data Analysis of the Posttest

4.2.1 The Independent Sample T-Test of the Posttest of Both Groups

The purpose of the posttest is to check the value of the application of TPR approach after the experiment.

T-Test

Group Statistic					
	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	EG	20	100.0000	.00000	.00000
Scores	CG	20	96.7500	7.30447	1.63333

(Notes: EG= Experimental Group   CG= Control Group)

This chart shows that the mean scores of the two groups are different. The mean score of the EG is 100 and is higher than the CG which is about 97, which finds a little difference between the mean scores of the EG and the CG.

Independent Sample Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Pretest Scores	Equal variances assumed	21.726	.000	1.990	38	.054	3.25000
	Equal variances not assumed			1.990	19.000	.061	3.25000

Independent Sample Test

		t-test for Equality of Means		
		Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			Lower	Upper
Pretest Scores	Equal variances assumed	1.63333	-.05650	6.55650
	Equal variances not assumed	1.63333	-.16860	6.66860

According to the Independent-Sample T-Test analysis of the data, there is a significant difference concerning the vocabulary learning between two groups. The vocabulary learning of the EG had improved and was better than the CG, because the statistical significance (sig.) of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances is 0.000 ($<.0.05$).

4.3 Discussion

The results show that there is no distinction in English level between two groups. But after teaching experiment, there is a significant difference between them. The mean score of the experiment group is higher than the control group. The experiment group has a better command of the vocabulary spelling than that of the control group. So the TPR approach can help students with their vocabulary learning.

5. Conclusion

The TPR approach emphasizes learning with physical actions (Asher,1969). It can create a more relaxing atmosphere in class. The students learn the language under less pressure. The results show that the experiment group has a good command of vocabulary spelling than the control group. This answers the second research question and indicates that the TPR approach has several advantages compared with the traditional teaching method. The results also imply the answer to the first research question. Children are active and playful and they cannot pay full attention to study. Thus how to stimulate their interest becomes a question. The TPR approach encourages students to learn English by actions, so words taught in class are mainly verbs or verb phrases by combining the pictures of words and physical actions. During the teaching process, the students were asked to imitate actions until they could do actions by themselves. Gradually the students turned to be more active in class.

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