

**T**otal Physical Response, or TPR, is a language teaching method made in heaven. Students love it. It is successful and fun and stress-free, for you and for them. It requires no PhD in discourse analysis to understand or implement, no licence to practise, no expensive materials or props. You can

body conversations'. When the baby responds, she is rewarded with more verbal petting. By the time children are two and a half, they are capable of understanding (but not speaking) long, grammatically-complex instructions of the 'Stop hitting your little sister and go and sit down and watch the television with Auntie Sue' variety.

# Total Physical Response

**Robin Cain** introduces a brain-compatible, stress-free approach to language learning.

integrate it into whatever syllabus has been imposed on you. So why isn't TPR part of the mainstream of English language teaching?

## What is TPR?

Stripped down to its essentials, TPR is a way of using movement, gesture and group dynamics, linked with spoken language in the form of commands, to create an atmosphere in which learners quickly and easily acquire comprehension of new vocabulary and structures. In the process, something called 'impulse to language' also comes into play.

## In the beginning

All language teachers at some point reflect on the embarrassing fact that, despite often heroic efforts on the part of them and their students, language learning seems slow, laborious and frankly rather unsuccessful compared with the insolent skill of those consummate linguists, babies and small children. It was in the detailed observation of these brilliant little learners that an American psychologist, James Asher, gained the insights on which TPR is founded. What worked for them might work for everyone, he thought. But what was it? Linguistically, what really happens in a baby's life?

Babies don't actually talk at all, as they float through the day on alpha and theta brainwaves. But they do listen when they are spoken to, and they respond, typically with movement – a smile or a simple action. Asher refers to these exchanges as 'language-

It is also worth noting that no-one ever tries seriously to teach little children to talk. They just start when they're ready, whenever that is – and anyone with children will remember the day the dam burst. But even when they do start to speak, their production always lags far behind what they understand. And typically, parents don't bother trying to correct their children's mistakes, because they know all will come right in time. Thus without any teaching, and with little or no overt correcting of errors, this 'method' of language teaching has a 100% success rate.

At the core of TPR lies the notion that humans are probably biologically wired up to acquire language through responding physically to language, and then internalising both vocabulary and

*'I won't ask you any questions and there's no test at the end'*

grammar, until they reach a stage when they are ready to start talking, a stage Asher calls 'comprehension literacy'. According to TPR theory, language acquisition is a linear progression: comprehension first, then speech. This notion is supported by the architecture of the brain, which appears to have two distinct regions, one dedicated to controlling speech (Broca's area), and one for comprehension of speech (Wernicke's area).

# Total Physical Response

## ►►► First lessons in TPR

The 'entry level' TPR lesson is organised with the teacher sitting at one end of the room in the middle chair of a row of three. The rest of the class divides into two groups, who sit at right angles to the teacher's chairs, facing each other across the open space between them. In the middle there is often a small table with a few props – a hat or two, a saucepan – it depends on the content of your lesson.



The typical layout of a TPR classroom.

Early TPR lessons should always begin with a reassurance to the class: *'You will not be called on to speak. I won't ask you any questions, and there's no test at the end. So enjoy yourselves.'*

The teacher may begin by reading out in a normal voice the language to be covered that day. In a beginners' class, this might be a few new verb forms and 15 or 20 vocabulary items – a mix of nouns, adjectives, prepositions, and adverbs. The class usually responds with nervous laughter. The teacher then may say with a smile, *'By the end of this session, you will understand all this.'*

The teacher asks for two volunteers and in their mother tongue (or through gestures), the teacher says, *'Listen to what I say, watch what I do, then we'll do it together.'* To the others she says, *'All you have to do is watch.'* The teacher gives herself a command in a clear voice, *'Stand up'*, and then carries it out. She does it two or three times and then says to her two helpers, *'Do it with me'*. They all do it together. The rest of the

class just watch. If students start to call out the words, she will just raise an index finger to her lips. Speaking is not the idea here; it will emerge later.

When her helpers are confident with the lesson's new language, the teacher may extend the command to the rest of the class. Maybe to one side of the room and then the other. Or just to one pair of students. Or to everyone with black shoes. You get the idea. Finally she can ask if anyone wants to try it alone. Performing alone needn't ever be rushed, but it is a key element in the process – part of the 'language impulse'.

Once *'stand up'* is clear, the lesson moves on to key action verbs. I usually

introduce *sit down, walk to, point at, jump, turn, stop* and *touch*, combined with basic classroom props, and it's not long before the class can respond accurately to commands such as, *'Walk to the table and touch the red book'*. From there, you can go almost anywhere. In following lessons, new words are integrated with earlier words, so that there is more and more language flying around. The volume of words causes no stress, because the students have already absorbed and assimilated them.

## But don't we all do TPR?

Many teachers already incorporate aspects of 'physical response' in their teaching, but check out your practice against this TPR list to see whether you're using the total method:

- You never, ever, under any circumstances, try to 'catch out' a student who is performing commands. The performance *is* the learning process.

- Language is not translated or explained. Students see, understand and act.
- Students are not asked to speak until, paradoxically, they have started speaking. As their comprehension increases, the desire to speak will emerge. This may not happen for several lessons. When it does, you go with the flow. Until it does, you don't force it.
- Students are never isolated. They always work in pairs and groups, until you're sure everyone knows exactly what to do. Only then do we ask students to perform alone. The correcting of mistakes too early changes a party into a nightmare.
- Bizarre and 'off the wall' commands are keys to memory. *'Touch your nose to the window'* is not only good theatre, it is also a memorable image.

## The impulse to language

There is something almost magical about some of the dynamics of the method. The 'impulse to language' is the inherent human drive to communicate though language. In a TPR session, one of the most striking aspects is the rapt attention of those who 'just watch'. As one person speaks, others move, and the rest observe. It feels almost primeval. TPR in practice is a reminder that language acquisition may not, after all, be primarily an intellectual activity.

Another aspect of the 'impulse to language' is to do with performing commands, which seems to have a

## Summary of a TPR lesson sequence

- The teacher gives a command verbally and models it herself.
- She asks two helpers to model it with her, while the others watch.
- She asks the whole class to follow her command.
- She asks groups within the class to model the command.

Then after some sessions, when students express the desire to speak:

- Members of the class give the teacher commands.
- Students in pairs model and respond for each other.
- Students perform solo for the class, once the teacher is sure they understand the language.



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The teacher and two volunteers follow instructions.

powerful impact on memory. It also completes the TPR cycle. When students do start to want to speak, they start by telling the teacher what to do, and then move on to giving commands to each other.

## Complex language

*'But we can all get beginners to follow simple instructions,' I hear you cry. 'What about complex grammatical structures? How do students get to the point of being able to order meals in restaurants and take part in international negotiations?'*

The fact is, that when the grammar starts to get tough, TPR comes into its own. It does, after all, present language in a way that the brain is wired up to accept, rather than asking students to follow some 'logical' model that is 'brain-antagonistic'.

With more advanced students, I like to have the room fringed with little units of realia – a kitchen, a shop, an office, a wild west saloon. If you're pushed for space, use minimal props and be creative around the central table. You still work with helpers, you still start by modelling your own commands and then getting the group to follow instructions, but because there is so much more language available, you can create a rich verbal environment. Complex grammar items are, after all, only notionally complex. Intellectually, people are capable of dealing with very complex ideas, and the following are examples of language that students will be quite comfortable with after a very short exposure to the language and the method:



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Written language is gradually introduced and practised with physical actions such as pointing.

*Jacques, walk slowly into the saloon and point at the man who is wearing a red clown nose.*

*Geneviève, if Marie moves the chair under the window, make a funny face.*

*François, when Sabine opens the door, shout 'Who's there?' as loudly as you can.*

⚠ Set yourself a task to help think this approach through. You want to tackle those devilish 'If' clauses. How would you help students acquire these, using TPR? Negatives? Questions? The present perfect? The future continuous? It's all remarkably straightforward if you just think about it for a moment or two.

And what about reading and writing? It's true that the model aims for students to become quite comfortable with what 'sounds' right before attempting to teach in a more conventional way. But just as people develop beyond following simple commands in their own language, so other elements can be introduced in the TPR classroom. When students are ready to enjoy reading texts, give them texts. When they ask for rules, give them rules. The important thing is that the students set the pace.

## Success

TPR is sublime and elegant in its simplicity, and it works on many levels.

- It leads to rapid understanding and long-term retention of new language.
- It suits all abilities. Students who don't do well in 'normal' classes often shine, and it is a great confidence booster for all students.
- It is virtually stress-free. In TPR, the atmosphere is noisy and playful, never threatening. A good TPR session is the best party in town. People love it because it pushes buttons that are meant to be pushed.
- It is totally flexible. You can easily use TPR to introduce new language with even the most prescriptive coursebook. Or you can teach a course entirely through TPR. It works at all levels.

When the teacher reads over the material covered in an hour's session and everyone understands every word, the beaming smiles say it all: *'I can learn this language.'* **TP**

### Finding out more about TPR

There is a TPR website:  
<http://www.tpr-world.com>

Books on TPR are available only through the publisher:  
Sky Oaks Productions,  
PO Box 1102, Los Gatos,  
California 95031, USA  
[tpworld@aol.com](mailto:tpworld@aol.com)

Asher, James *Learning Another Language Through Actions*  
5th Edition 1996

*This book covers the history of TPR, has a huge bibliography, a FAQ section, and a full sample syllabus for 160 hours of English for beginners.*

Garcia, Ramiro *Instructor's Notebook: How to Apply TPR for the Best Results*  
4th edition 1996

*A real teacher's bible full of practical TPR material you can use. Examples are in Spanish, but the book is about method.*

Schessler, Eric *English Grammar Through Actions* 1995



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**W**e all have to cope with occasional busy and stressful periods, such as passing an exam, preparing a new course, attending an important interview, and so on. These shortish bursts of activity often give us a buzz, and we can weather them well if we allow ourselves time to rest up afterwards and give our body (and our mind) a chance to recharge before the next onslaught. What is not fine is the *distress* caused by long periods when we don't have time to rest and recuperate.


- Internally, we need to resource ourselves, mentally and physically, so as to be in the best possible state to deal with any stressful situations.

### Take control

Learn to say 'no'. It's a very simple word, but many of us (including me, and the girl in *Oklahoma*) seem to find it very difficult to pronounce. It comes partly from wanting to be nice and helpful, and partly because we want people to like us. But they'll like us less


# Stresslessness

In her second article, **Jane Revell** takes the stress out of distress.

 Before you read on, get a piece of paper and a pencil. You can actually start doing something about it now.

### Stressbusters

In the first instance, we need some 'stressbusters' – a First Aid kit to keep us going. You know the sort of thing – a relaxing bath, a brisk walk, a workout at the gym.

 Make a note now of your three best stressbusters. And then plan to do at least one of them in the next 48 hours.

This buys us time, but we need a longer-term plan – and we need to find the time to make the plan and put it into action. And for those of you who think you haven't got that time, here's a story from Stephen Covey – his 'seventh habit of highly effective people', which he calls 'sharpening the saw':

*A walker comes across a forest worker struggling to saw down a tree with a very blunt saw.*

*'Why don't you sharpen your saw?' suggests the walker. 'It will make it easier and a lot quicker.'*

*'Oh I haven't got time for that,' replies the worker. 'I've got to get this tree sawn down!'*

### Inside and out

I find it helpful to think about a two-fold approach to dealing with stress, and both are important:


- Externally, we need to identify what (or who) exactly is causing us stress, and we need to do something about it.

if we agree to do something and then let them down.

If you're already very busy, and someone asks you to do something, take a deep breath before you agree. Is it reasonable that they should ask you? Do you want to do it? Is there anyone else who could do it? Can you extend the deadline? If you take on this new task, what else will you not have time for, and who else will you have to disappoint?

Now, practise saying the following sentence: *I'm very sorry, but on this occasion, I'm afraid I have to say no.*

*All too often we talk to ourselves in ways we would never tolerate from anyone else*

 Try the following exercise to give you some control over external stressors – feeling out of control is itself one of the biggest causes of stress, after all.

- Make a list of ten things that are causing you stress. Keep going until you've got all ten (even if the last few are not too major).
- Next to each one, jot down three reasons why you *can't* do anything about it. Again, complete all ten.
- For each of the ten stressors, write just one thing you *can* do (something practical, easy and possible) to improve the situation in some way.