

A Comparison Between The Total Physical Response And The Direct Method

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In this paper I would like to compare the development of two teaching methods, the Direct Method, as it has come to be known since the late 1800s, and the Total Physical Response, so-named by James J. Asher in the 1960s. These two methods have similarities in their practical applications which, though striking, are easy to overlook due to the importance placed on one major theoretical difference. Both of these methods are particularly successful with beginners and intermediate students, and an analysis of their similarities should show that instead of being antagonistic, these two views of teaching would work well in tandem.

Both methods take Nature itself as their starting point. Total Physical Response has as its basis the hypothesis that second language learners, just as babies learning their first language, need a silent period during which to acquire a basic sense of the language before they ever produce a word. The interpretation I give to the Direct Method can be summarized by quoting Harold E. Palmer's description at the beginning of his book, *English Through Actions*, minus the emphasis on teaching pronunciation through phonetics or on the use of connected texts which exist in some versions. It is a method

...in which translation in any shape or form is banished from the classroom, including the use of the mother-tongue and of the bilingual dictionary;

One in which grammar, when taught at all, is taught inductively;

One in which oral teaching precedes any form of reading and writing;

One in which the meanings of words and forms are taught by means of object lessons or by natural context;

One in which the vocabulary and structure of the language are inculcated to a large extent by questions asked by the teacher and answered by the pupils. ¹⁾

The man who laid the theoretical basis for the Direct Method was J. S. Blackie, a Scots professor of Latin and Greek who wrote in the mid-1800s. His ideas as expressed below herald the arrival of communicative methods of teaching in the 19th century. In his own words:

The more near a method approaches to the method employed by Nature the more near does that method approach to perfection... What then are the elements of this natural method? 'Tis a simple affair. First, there is a direct appeal to the ear, the natural organ by which the language is acquired. Secondly: this appeal is made in circumstances where there is a direct relation, *ipso facto*, established between the sound and the thing signified... Thirdly: the same living appeal to the ear is continuously and for a considerable length of time repeated. Fourthly: the appeal is made under circumstances which cannot fail strongly to excite the attention, and to engage the sympathies of the hearer. In these four points, lies the whole plain mystery of Nature's method. ²⁾

A resemblance to the ideas behind the Direct Method is to be expected from a recent ancestor of Gouin and Berlitz, but the similarities to the ideas behind Total Physical Response (TPR) belie that method's modern aura. Blackie has relegated reading to second place, after aural comprehension, its natural position in native speaker language learning. He also takes a position common to both TPR and the Direct Method, that there must be physical stimulus to create the association between the sound and the object signified. Blackie's point about "the same living appeal...continuously repeated," that is, repeated exposure to select words, is an integral part of both methods (see examples below). Finally, Blackie condemns rote learning when he emphasizes the importance of *exciting* attention rather than demanding it. The same emphasis is found in both methods: it manifests itself in earnest questions, often about the students themselves, in the case of the Direct Method and in novel commands in the case of TPR. Unlike pattern practice exercises where one part of speech is mechanically substituted for another, the Direct Method depends on unpredictable questions and TPR uses surprise commands to stimulate genuine responses in students. Understanding the stimulus becomes the condition for a correct response, not merely a hoped-for goal as is the case in pattern practice. Students cannot respond successfully without understanding the question or the command.

C. F. Kroeh, a contemporary critic and admirer of Sauveur, a 19th century practitioner of Direct Method, had this to say about language learning:

...the conditions will never again be the same as those under which (the learner) learnt his mother tongue... The new language has not the same chance of success as the first. It has a habit to overcome...³⁾

What is this "habit" but the cultural as well as the linguistic environment that every native speaker grows up in? Overcoming this habit in students is one task of the foreign language teacher. Is it logical to constantly refer back to the mother tongue, source of the habit, in basic or intermediate classes where interference is more likely to impede communication? Translation is comparable to cultural comparison: it is likely to breed stereotypes and prejudices instead of giving a true impression of the language. The exclusive use of the target language at this stage will give a truer picture: in the early stages of TPR the teacher becomes the students' aural environment, and in the Direct Method, their speaking partner.

As to the method of teaching, Kroeh has this to say:

...the 'natural method' is not the process by which children learn from their mothers. It is, or ought to be, a great deal better than that, though based upon it. It is natural in its basis; but highly artificial in its development.⁴⁾

Although by "natural method" Kroeh is referring to the Direct Method as developed by Sauveur in the 1860s and 1870s, what he says is equally relevant to TPR. A teaching method, by its essence, is an attempt to shortcut the long road children must take when acquiring their mother tongue; TPR imitates the mother talking to her infant and the Direct Method mirrors the later stage of simple questions to the child, but both employ an unnaturally concentrated form.

As Asher says in *Learning Another Language Through Actions*:

Children and adults can achieve understanding of a second language through the imitative faster than an infant acquiring its first language. The reason is that the in-

fant's repertoire of responses is limited to a *few primitive behaviors* such as looking, reaching... By contrast, the student has a vast network of complex behaviors that can be evoked in response to directions uttered in the target language. Hence, the understanding of language that the infant achieved in thousands of hours can be condensed into a few hundred hours of training for the student acquiring a second language.⁵⁾

Any effective teaching method can teach the foreign learner to understand a language in a shorter time because of the learner's greater experience.

TPR and the Direct Method, because of their insistence on comprehensible input and their sole use of the target language, serve up a concentrated language with a limited number of structures and vocabulary items at each stage. A. P. Howatt in his *History of English Language Teaching* describes the limitations put on vocabulary and structure in the Berlitz course, one of the best known Direct Methods. This description is based on an account which was published in 1895 by A. Pakscher, the Director of a Berlitz school in Germany:

(The early Berlitz English course) was in two parts, each subdivided into two sections. The opening section of Part 1 began with the objects in the classroom followed by *to be* and the most common adjectives (*big, small, thin, thick*, etc.). Other vocabulary items that could be taught ostensively (parts of the body, clothing, etc.) were introduced next as well as prepositional relationships. Lexical verbs appeared from Lesson 5 onwards but the alphabet was withheld until Lesson 8, a very unfamiliar procedure for a nineteenth-century language course.⁶⁾

If the student is a beginner, the teacher can ask a number of questions about two familiar objects in the classroom in a flowing dialogue that introduces the key words after negative answers:

T: What's this?	S: It's a pen.
T: Is it mine or yours?	S: It's yours.
T: Is it on the floor?	S: No, it's not.
T: Where is it?	S: It's on the chair.
T: Is that a pen, too?	S: Yes, it is.
T: Is it green?	S: No, it's not.
T: What color is it?	S: It's black.
T: It's mine, isn't it?	S: No, it's not.
T: Whose pen is it?	S: It's mine.

Compare this to a series of commands in a TPR lesson taken from J. A. Asher's book *Learning Another Language Through Actions*. This segment was designed for a beginners' class. All the sentences being commands given by the teacher, I will omit any references to speaker turns.

Touch the book.
Touch the paper.
Touch the pencil.
Pick up the book.
Pick up the paper.
Pick up the pencil.

Put down the paper.
Put down the book.
Put down the pencil.
Pick up the paper and the pencil.
Put down the paper only.
Now, put down the pencil.
Pick up the pencil and the book.
Put down the book but do not put down the pencil.
Pick up the paper.
Do not put down the paper.
Now, put down the paper. ⁷⁾

What is striking in both examples is the minimalization of vocabulary and the variety in the use of structure, i.e., the insistence on the verb TO BE in the Direct Method example, the use of the imperative with only three verbs, TOUCH, PICK UP, and PUT DOWN in the TPR example, and the repetition of vocabulary in both. Because the students are dealing with familiar structures, both of these segments can be covered at a fast pace. Variation and speed play an important role in maintaining interest and excitement in the classroom.

In the above examples repetition keeps the material comprehensible. Teaching beginners only in the target language forces teachers to reduce their vocabulary, and both TPR and DM use this constraint to the student's advantage; with a limited vocabulary, structural items such as the use of key questions (what, where, etc.), "or" questions and tag questions (isn't it?) in the Direct Method, and the use of "and", "but" and the negative in TPR, can be emphasized. Vocabulary is limited to classroom objects at this point to enhance the immediacy of the lesson.

Harold E. Palmer, a one-time Berlitz teacher who went on to become a major influence in English teaching, can be seen as the bridge between Direct Method and TPR. In his book, *English Through Actions*, Palmer demonstrates an interest not only in classroom language practice but in how language is acquired by students. He divides learning into "The Four Phases of Assimilation": Perception, Recognition, Imitation and Reproduction. Perception is when the student notices the appearance of a new word; recognition is the moment at which the student understands the meaning of the word (or group of words); imitation is the point at which the learner can imitate the sound regardless of whether or not recognition takes place; finally, reproduction is when the student can actually utter the word from memory. Perception is always the initial step, but the other three do not necessarily follow in this order.

From these distinctions Palmer comes up with the idea of an "imperative drill". If recognition, which is merely comprehension of a word or group of words, is the goal, then there is no need for production. In the imperative drill oral production is dropped. As Palmer says, "the teacher gives verbal orders to the pupil; the pupil executes them. This is one of the simplest and most primitive forms of stimulus and reaction in the whole range of speech-activities." ⁸⁾ Compare the following passage from Palmer's book to the previous example from Asher and it will be clear how much Total Physical Response owes to Palmer. In *English Through Actions* Palmer lists verbs in alphabetical order, and although there is no instruction to mix verbs, "The teacher

should note particularly that in most cases each order is complementary to another order. Thus if the pupils are told to open their books they will subsequently be told to shut them." ⁹⁾

RUB your desk (*or* seat, book, pencil, nose, eyes, head, etc.)

your desk with (the thumb of) your left hand, etc.

your desk and your seat at the same time.

your desk and your seat but one after the other, etc.

your arm with your left hand, etc.

your nose hard... now rub it gently, etc. ¹⁰⁾

The above comes from the Collective Imperative Drills (for groups). The resemblance to TPR is even more marked in the Individual Imperative Drill shown below:

1) Stand up.

2) Take your book.

3) Bring your book to me.

4) Put your book under my desk.

5) Put your book under my chair.

6) Pick up your book.

7) Hold up your book.

8) Put down your book, etc. ¹¹⁾

Here was born the productionless drill that has become the basis of TPR. The major difference with TPR is in the degree to which the method is meant to be used. In Palmer's case he does not envisage the use of the method exclusively: "On the whole, however, we may say that the exercise should never exceed fifteen minutes nor be shorter than three minutes." ¹²⁾

As to its effectiveness, Palmer says:

I will therefore go so far as to suggest that no method of teaching foreign speech is likely to be economical or successful which does not include in the first period a very considerable proportion of that type of classroom work which consists in the carrying out by the pupil or pupils of orders issued by the teacher. Numerous experiments carried out in various countries under class-room conditions have shown with what extraordinary facility pupils become proficient in understanding and in executing orders. ¹³⁾

Here Palmer breaks with the production-oriented dialogue form standard in the Direct Method developed at the end of the 19th century.

James J. Asher comes to the field of language teaching from his particular field, psychology. His own difficulties and those of others at school led him to look into the psychological aspects of learning a foreign language. At the same time his experiments led him to the conclusion that if a student could understand a concept at the first introduction, acquisition of that concept was more likely to result in long-term retention. One hypothesis that he advanced is as follows: "Learning... is the *reverse* of problem solving. For example, learning means to internalize an existing concept. Problem solving means that one *repairs* an existing concept that has a tension-producing flaw." ¹⁴⁾ The key to learning a language, therefore, is to internalize the existing concept (language) at the first introduction. Students appeared to internalize concepts more efficiently when tension was removed, so he sought a teaching method that would be stress-free. Asking

students to act out commands rather than to answer questions alleviates the difficulties in the production of unfamiliar sounds while demonstrations by the teacher of the *actions* before the students are asked to perform them gives them confidence. In this way fear of incomprehension and failure, major causes of stress, disappears.

Asher compares infants' acquisition of their first language to the way in which people acquire a foreign language: "Once a child achieves fluency in the native language, the 'biological' pattern for acquiring language does not disappear. Hence, if a person wants to acquire another language without stress, the sequence should be: first, acquire comprehension of the target language, and as comprehension becomes more and more sophisticated, there will be a point at which the individual spontaneously is *ready* to produce the language." ¹⁵⁾ This lack of any pressure to produce language on the part of students is the fundamental difference between TPR and other teaching methods such as the Direct Method.

In many ways TPR and its precursor, Palmer's Imperative Drill, seem to allow students to understand lexical items and structures at a much faster rate than if they were forced to produce them immediately after the first hearing. Ease of learning promotes self-confidence in the learning process. Personally I have used this technique to introduce "before" and "after" clauses, and I was impressed by the ease with which the students responded to commands which, when they are put in question form, have created some confusion for native Japanese speakers in the past. Relative clauses, structures so often misinterpreted by my students whose native word order is so different, should also be easier to assimilate by using commands such as "Pick up the book which I put on the floor" or "Walk over to the person who has just picked up the book". TPR through its use of humorous absurdities such as "Put your head on your desk and laugh." is also very motivating.

It does not follow, however, that this method of introduction is suitable in every case. Here I will take some examples from Asher's book to illustrate the imprecision, and hence the misinterpretations, that may arise from an overdependence on such a method. In the eleventh lesson the teacher suddenly introduces "will" along with "tomorrow":

Tomorrow will be Tuesday. Jose, run to me, take Tuesday (a card with the word written on it) and give it to Shirou. Shirou, what day is tomorrow? Ramiro, what will you do tomorrow? Lauro, what will you do on Tuesday, which is tomorrow? ¹⁶⁾

The TPR introduction is certainly insufficient; only in the questioning segment that follows does the student get a glimmer of future implication of "will".

The introduction of "can" without the student misinterpreting its basic meaning also seems beyond the capacity of TPR. Once again from the same book:

The instructor said, "I can jump over this box. Juan, tell me to jump over the box."

Juan said, "Jump over the box," and the instructor acted by jumping over the box.

Maria, can you jump over the box? *Answer:* "Yes." ¹⁷⁾

In this example there is no sense of possibility. There is no obvious difference between the above examples and "I'm going to jump over the box. Watch me." No doubt poor examples are the fault of the teacher, but note also that this is not TPR. The command immediately leads into a question.

In the "TPR Student Kit: The Classroom", there are the following examples using "if" and "when" clauses with various tenses. A student will not be able to distinguish the correct use of one tense from another given the almost identical surroundings.

Lesson 6

4. If I place a cap on my teacher's head, you put an open lunch box on your desk.
15. If you put a cap on the blond girl's head, I will put a cap on my teacher's head.

Lesson 8

12. When I place a cap on my teacher's head, you will imitate me.
18. When Dolores flies her large bird and perches the bird on her red chair, you fly your small bird... ¹⁸⁾

I submit that the student will come away more confused when examples are as unclear as these. Rather than trying to fit structures into the imperative at this advanced stage, the teacher should demonstrate impossibility (e.g. trying to touch a 4-meter-high ceiling) and say to the students: "I can't." Then through questioning the teacher will be able to expand the concept to take in its affirmative meaning:

Can you touch the ceiling? Can you touch the top of the doorframe? Can you see...?
Can you hear...? Can your father cook...? Who can drive...? Where can you go by subway...? How long can you stay out tonight? ETC.

The same holds true for "if" + "will" sentences:

T: Is it going to rain tomorrow? S: I don't know.

T: *If* it rains tomorrow, will you stay inside?

T: If your car doesn't start tomorrow morning, how will you get to work? ETC.

The idea of uncertainty when using "if" will be clear after sufficient examples, and during the drill the forms of the verbs will become apparent. Another advantage of the Direct Method over TPR at this stage is that students' production will be more natural.

At some point in the course (Asher suggests after 10 to 20 hours) the teacher must confront the problem of production. It follows that students taught in the imperative form will be adept in using that form. It does not make sense to expect the same students to be able to use the question form when the emphasis is not there. Of course, the first instances of production are expected to be commands similar to those given by the teacher, and there is some drill work using question forms included in the syllabus (given at the end of Asher's book) so that students will not be entirely unfamiliar with the question form, but I expect that students in a TPR class would suffer from slow response and question delivery because of this deficiency. This would be doing them a great disservice. Quick response is as much a part of conversation as is good comprehension, and questions of student motivation should not be allowed to obscure necessary training. Palmer's remarks on this point are still as valid today as they were when his book was first published in 1925:

The young child reacts immediately or not at all. Students must learn, for example, to answer questions without hesitation or delay; they must be prepared to name an object immediately it is shown to them... ¹⁹⁾

Although production is not the overriding concern in TPR, it is taught in the lessons mentioned

in Asher's book. Questions are asked and answers are expected from the students, as is the case in the Direct Method. How, then, should production be taught?

Harold E. Palmer, the originator of the idea of learning language through actions, balances the two teaching methods. He was perhaps the last major exponent of the Direct Method which he proposed using in conjunction with his imperative drill. In a section of *English Through Actions*, entitled "Conventional Conversation" he outlines certain rules guiding his dialogue approach:

(teacher's questions and students' answers) are subject to certain conventions, each of which is calculated to facilitate the forming of the elementary speech-habits.

The most important of these conventions are the following:

1. In order to prove whether the pupil has accurately observed the form of the question, he must frame his answer on the exact model of the question. For instance, the answer to "How many books are there on this shelf?" must not be "This shelf contains twelve books"... but "There are twelve books on it"...
2. The pupil must replace when necessary the noun in the question by an appropriate *pronoun* in the answer and, in similar ways, not repeat needlessly all the words used in the question. Thus the answer to "Where's the book?" should not be "The book's on the desk," but "It's on the desk"...
3. The answers (except in special cases) should not be unduly laconic nor unduly long. Thus the answer to a question such as "Is this my book?" should not be "Yes" nor "Yes, it is your book," but "Yes, it is."
4. No question should be asked the answer to which is obviously beyond the range of the pupil's knowledge of things and events...
5. ...the style used may occasionally be more formal and precise than would be the case in a normal conversation...
6. Definitions may be purely conventional; there is no necessity for minute precision, for the object of these exercises is not to teach geography, physics, logic or any other specific science, but to train the pupils to become proficient in the elementary speech-activities...²⁰⁾

These rules mirror natural speech patterns closely enough so that any student abiding by them will be able to follow nouns through their transformations into pronouns. Their speech will also sound more natural than students who repeat the whole question in their answer. At the same time the teacher will be constantly aware of the students' ability to understand the questions, something which is not always clear when the students use fragments. For example:

T: Where is your father from?

S: Tokyo.

T: When did he leave?

S: Leave?

T: Yes, when did he leave Tokyo?

S: He's in Tokyo.

T: Is he *from* Tokyo?

S: No, he's from Nagoya.

Here the student must have missed the word "from" in the initial question. Had the teacher insisted on an answer such as "He's from Tokyo" instead of accepting a fragment as the answer, the time spent sorting out the problem could have been used more profitably.

I hope to have given a general idea of the advantages of both TPR and the Direct Method in this paper. Both methods are highly structured in their approaches to teaching, based as they are on the teaching of grammatical structures. They both rely on the induction of grammar rather than on its analysis and they both are oral methods. The former, by emphasizing what Palmer called Recognition on the theory that learners need a silent period to get accustomed to a new language in a stress-free atmosphere, avoids production by students in the first 10 or more hours of teaching. The latter, a production-oriented method, encourages production at earlier levels: in the case of Berlitz from the very beginning and in the case of Palmer after a certain amount of adjustment to the language has taken place. TPR appears to be a very motivating method for beginners due to the speed at which new language is comprehended. The Direct Method, on the other hand, appears to provide ways to cover grammatical points that TPR cannot teach clearly. With TPR providing input within the students' ability to comprehend but beyond their ability to produce, and the Direct Method providing the necessary production practice, the student will be able to learn foreign languages in a manner closely resembling that in which we learn our native tongue, in the progression which Palmer calls "The Four Phases of Assimilation."

NOTES

- 1) H. E. & D. Palmer, *English Through Actions* (Tokyo: Kaitakusha, 1955) p. 2, 3
- 2) J. S. Blackie, "On The Teaching of Languages", *The Foreign Quarterly Review XXXV* p. 176, 177
- 3) C. F. Kroeh, "Methods of Teaching Modern Languages", *Transactions and Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America III* p. 182, 183
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 180
- 5) J. J. Asher, *Learning Another Language Through Actions: The Complete Teacher's Guidebook* (Los Gatos: Sky Oaks Productions, Inc., 1988) p. 2-19
- 6) A. P. R. Howatt, *A History of English Language Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) p. 206
- 7) Asher, *Ibid.*, p. 4-7, 4-8
- 8) Palmer, *Ibid.*, p. 43
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 48
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 52
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 57
- 12) *Ibid.*, p. 47
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 43
- 14) Asher, *Ibid.*, p. 1-14
- 15) *Ibid.*, p. 2-18
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 4-30
- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 4-38
- 18) J.J. Asher, "TPR Student Kit: The Classroom" (Los Gatos: Sky Oaks Productions, Inc: 1989) Lessons 6, 8

19) Palmer, *Ibid.*, p. 21

20) *Ibid.*, p. 65, 66