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Language By Command

The Total Physical Response approach to learning language

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The Problem

IF DROPOUT RATES are a good measure of difficulty, the most difficult learning task for both children and adults may be the attempt to acquire a second language in school. A number of studies have shown that few students – often less than 5% who start in a second language – continue to proficiency. This lack of success is striking when compared to the language achievement of most six-year-olds, who *without schooling* have mastered all the essential parts of the individual's native language.

The comparison may be unfair in that a native six-year- old has had considerably more exposure to the language than the student gets (equivalent to 55 years of college instruction). Nevertheless, the fact that children eagerly learn while so many students drop out suggests that there is something in the *way* young children learn that is at least less stressful if not also more effective in other ways.

A Solution

These observations led me many years ago to look to early language acquisition for clues to a better way to teach foreign languages. There are three critical elements in the way children learn their first language:

1) Listening skill precedes speaking, with children often able to comprehend many complex utterances before they produce any intelligible speech.

2) Many of the utterances that are directed at an infant relate to actions, and more than 50% are in the form of commands such as: "Come here!" "Hold onto my finger!" "Look at Daddy!"

Through action and observation, the child's whole body is involved in decoding the "noise" of speech into language.

3) Listening seems to produce a "readiness" for speaking, but it appears that the process cannot be rushed. When the child has internalized an adequate cognitive map of the language through listening, s/he will spontaneously begin to produce utterances.

With the help of these clues, I and others have developed (and tested) an approach to language teaching that 1) reduces stress (indeed students find it fun), 2) accelerates acquisition of the target language (with languages as diverse as German, Japanese, Russian, Arabic, Hebrew, and even the sign language of the deaf), and 3) results in improved long-term retention.

How It Works

This approach, called the *total physical response* or TPR, introduces the language through the use of commands (imperative sentences) and has students demonstrate their understanding through action responses. In TPR, the instructor becomes a movie director who guides actors – the students – through complicated scenes much like a parent guiding an infant through intimate caretaking situations. And just as the infant develops an intricate understanding of spoken language, students acquire, with pleasure, an in-depth understanding of the target language.
When working with beginning students, the TPR instructor starts with simple directions in a relationship that is like a caring parent interacting with an infant. For example, the instructor will utter a direction in the target language and model with one or more students. If the target language is English as a second language, the instructor may say, "stand up" (the instructor and a student sitting on either side of the instructor will immediately stand up). Then, "sit down," and everyone sits down. "Stand up. ..sit down . . .stand up. . .sit down ."

When the students are responding with confidence, the instructor may say, "walk" and the instructor and students walk forward. Then, "stop" and everyone stops. Again, "walk" and everyone walks until the instructor says, "stop" and everyone stops. "Turn" and the instructor along with the students will turn. Again, "turn" and everyone turns. Once more, "turn" and everyone turns.

The instructor, like a caring parent, is sensitive to whether the students are receiving the messages. The body movements of each student will signal immediately how comfortable they feel. If there is hesitation, for instance, the skillful instructor will slow down and continue to work with a routine in a compassionate manner until each student feels confident enough to act alone in response to the instructor's directions.

The objective is to "lower the filter" (that is, reduce stress) while simultaneously building the student's self-confidence. A successful TPR experience results in the students saying to themselves, "I CAN DO THIS. I CAN DO IT."

While the initial instructions are simple, within a few minutes directions can be expanded in complexity such as:

Stand up.
Walk to the cabinet. Open the drawer of the cabinet and look for a bottle of aspirin. Pick up the bottle. Close the drawer and walk quickly to Mary.
Offer her the bottle.
Mary, take the bottle from him and ...

As the training advances, past tense, future tense, and essentially all the elements of the target language can be woven into these commands. After a number of TPR sessions, the students, just like young children, will spontaneously begin to speak the language, and this skill transfers easily into reading and writing. The instructor works with and encourages these developments but does not force them.

Why It Works

In study after study for 25 years, laboratory experiments and classroom observations have demonstrated results that were extremely positive. When the instructor skillfully uses the target language to direct the student's behavior, understanding of the utterance is transparent, often in only one exposure. Also, the understanding is achieved without stress and then retained for weeks, months, and even years. Language-body communications is a fascinating and powerful principle of learning. It seems to be a universal principle that holds true for *any* language including sign language for the deaf. It seems to hold true for *any* age group that has been studied from children to senior citizens.

Yet I was puzzled by why the approach worked so well until I came across the fascinating work on *brain lateralization* (left-brain/right-brain research). One particular study that has, I believe, important implications for learning languages, was done with a 15-year-old boy who had his corpus callosum (the connecting bundle of nerves between the two hemispheres) cut to prevent severe epileptic seizures.
In one series of demonstrations after the operation, the boy (whose initials are P.S.) was seated a few feet from an opaque screen and instructed to fix his gaze on a dot in the center of the screen. Then a rear-view projector flashed words or pictures on either the right or left side of the screen and P.S. was asked to tell what he saw. Here's what happened.

When a picture of an ordinary object such as a pencil was flashed to the left side of the brain (right screen), P.S. immediately said, "I saw a pencil." But if the object on the next trial was an orange which appeared for an instant to the right brain, P.S. would report, "I didn't see anything." Curiously, P.S. correctly named all objects projected into the left brain but reported seeing nothing that was flashed to the right brain. *It was as if the right hemisphere was blind.*

But this "blindness" was an illusion. The individual *did see* the pictures and words flashed to the right brain but he was not conscious of it – that is, he could not express the experience verbally. How do we know that? Even though P.S. reported seeing nothing, if the researcher said, "Please pick up a pencil with your left hand (controlled by the right brain) and write the word that just appeared on the screen," P.S. scribbled the word "orange." The researchers were astonished to discover that even though P.S. reported seeing nothing for an item flashed to his right brain, he could *write, spell, point to* or *pick up* the appropriate item with almost perfect accuracy. As long as the right brain could respond nonverbally, it could also accurately give opposites (select "white" if you see "black"), associations ("time" to go with "clock"), and rhymes ("new" to go with "canoe").

Clearly, the right hemisphere is mute – *unable to talk* – but it is processing information and can express itself if you provide a "voice box" such as touching, pointing or even spelling.
Because of the importance of commands in TPR, I was most interested in how P.S. would process these. Here's what happened. The directions to P.S. were "When you see a word such as laugh, please laugh. If you see cry, then cry."

When the command "rub" was flashed to the right brain, he rubbed the back of his head with his left hand. When asked, "What was the command?", he said, "Itch." It appeared that the left brain was not directly aware of the command but only attempted to interpret the action after it had happened.

This process was further demonstrated as follows: "P.S., assume the position of a …." and the word "boxer" was flashed to the right hemisphere. Immediately, P.S. shifted his body into a pugilistic stance.

"P.S., what word did you see?"

Without hesitation, he said, "Boxer."

Later this procedure was repeated, but just after "boxer" was projected to the right brain, P.S. was restrained from moving. Asked, "What word did you see?", and he said, "I didn't see a word." Moments later, when he was released, he assumed the position and said, "O.K., it was boxer."

Is the left hemisphere able to understand commands? When a command such as "laugh" was flashed to the left brain, P.S. often uttered the word aloud. The right brain then heard the direction and executed the command. Both hemispheres can recognize the correct response to a command when the individual is only required to point to a picture in a set of pictures, but *only the right hemisphere seems able to express appropriate behavior in response to commands*.

How does this apply to language acquisition? Clearly, both hemispheres are able to *interpret* language, but I believe that the infant first deciphers the meaning of language in the right hemisphere in association with observed actions. The left brain observes this association between language and action for hundreds of hours before it is ready for its feeble attempt to talk. Throughout the child's development, the left shadows the right, with the child's understanding as demonstrated in body expressions far in advance of its speaking. Therefore, it seems clear that a logical starting point for any instructional program that intends to teach another language is to structure the content especially for the right hemisphere.

The alternative is what I call the "talking head" model of language acquisition. This notion is that students should come into a classroom, sit down quietly in rows, and then make "noises" with their mouths on cue from a person in front of the class who points at a student and says, "Listen to what I say and repeat after me!"

This left hemispheric entrance is slow-motion learning. Each detail of production – which the student is *not ready* to make – is practiced before the student has internalized a holistic pattern of how the language works. By practicing surface features of production prematurely, the learning process is slowed down to a tedious, monotonous pace that extinguishes attention and retention. The consequence is stress and a high drop-out rate.

How does all this fit into a complete language program that goes from zero fluency to advanced students? What I am recommending is that entry level students of *any* age and in *any* language, should enter the target language with stress-free right brain instruction (and TPR is only one such approach) and gradually, as training advances, left brain instructional techniques are blended. As students progress and their confidence increases, they become ready to speak, to memorize (idioms and grammatical fine points), and to accept corrections for distortions in production. We have often found in TPR classes that students will *request* these things after a number of sessions, but this is quite different from the usual classroom where students attempt to perform these tasks *on demand* from the instructor. Yet even for advanced students, TPR continues to be helpful because it prepares students to perform role-playing with fuller emotion and to converse freely; right brain stimulation increases the chances for long-term retention for new vocabulary at any level; it helps students internalize complex structures more effectively than any other way; and – perhaps most importantly – learners at all levels enjoy TPR type activities and are motivated to do them.

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