

# Turkish students acquiring English with TPR: A personal testimony

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The Total Physical Response known worldwide as TPR was originated and researched for over 30 years by Dr. James J. Asher, San Jose State University, San Jose, California. This paper explores whether TPR will be successful with Turkish students learning English.

As explained by Asher in *Learning another Language Through Actions* (6th edition),

The brain and nervous system of humans of all ages, including adults, is wired to receive all languages the way infants acquire their native language. For example, infants are silent except for babbling, but physically respond to directions from caretakers such as: "Give me your hand." or "Eat your cereal." or "Don't make a fist when I'm trying to put on your coat."

During this important silent period, infant are sorting out the patterns of the incoming language including the sounds, grammar, and semantics.

They are creating an internal map of how the language works. Asher calls these transactions between the infant and the caretakers: language-body conversations.

At some point in the mapping, the infant is ready to speak. This cannot be forced, but will appear spontaneously. Some infants, such as the famous case of Albert Einstein, do not speak until the age 3, 4 or even 5 years in rare cases, but most infants start making intelligible utterances at about 18 months.

Asher's premise is that the process of acquiring a language that works for infants also is effective for children and adults acquiring a second, third language, or fourth language. There should be a period of silence for about three weeks in which students listen to the instructor utter a direction in the target language such as, "Stand and walk to the chalkboard," and then respond by walking to the chalkboard. During this crucial silent period, students in the classroom are mapping how the target language works including phonology, semantics and grammar. Between 10 and 20 hours, most students make the transition to speaking, which will happen spontaneously when each student is ready. Asher further suggests that there are no methods in language learning because "method" implies a formula and a formula implies a science. Teaching is an art, not a science. Hence, the instructor has a box of tools and TPR is perhaps the most powerful tool in the box because it enables students of all ages to enjoy immediate success acquiring any language. For the theory, research and step- by- step lessons, please see James J. Asher's *Learning Another Language Through Actions* and Ramiro Garcia's *Instructor's Notebook: How to apply TPR for best results*. All the original research articles by Asher are now available through Sky Oaks Productions, Inc. The Booklet and CD are entitled Prize- winning TPR Research by James J. Asher.

## **The Turkish culture: Will it block learning with TPR?**

I was apprehensive about the effectiveness of TPR in Turkey because of certain features in Turkish culture:

### **Teacher-centered classroom**

The Turkish educational system is mostly teacher-oriented. (Hesabcioglu, 1994). The teacher dominates the classroom; students respond only when they are asked. Traditionally, they are not encouraged to initiate a discussion or present a question, especially if the question is about a statement made by the teacher. Most of the time it is the teacher who talks in the classroom. What the teacher writes on the chalkboard is copied instantly. It is common for students to be silent in the classroom, while the teacher speaks. Students are generally passive listeners.

### **The reverence for book learning**

It is an understatement to say that there is an emphasis on book learning. In the Turkish culture, there is something almost "sacred" about book learning. This means that high value is placed on memorizing the contents of a book because it is assumed that books are the keys to the "good life." Practical applications of what is being learned is incidental. There seems to be a need to distinguish the learning acquired by a person educated within the formal system of the schools and the wisdom of a person on the street. Since it is not easy in Turkey to get into a formal educational system, this experience is given higher value than common sense or practical intelligence.

### **Learning another language**

There is a strong belief that the optimal and only way to learn another language such as English is to memorize grammar rules and vocabulary from a book. How much this will block the successful application of TPR in the classroom was an unknown factor to me. Turkish attitudes that should enable learning with TPR

### **The importance of the group**

In the past, Turks have been strongly group-oriented. People tend to do things in groups whether it be the family, clan, or work team. Contrary to American culture, individualism is not encouraged or rewarded. However, this is one aspect of Turkish culture that may be changing because people are leaving the compact organization of the village and moving to the city. Life in the city makes for greater individualism and competitiveness rather than cooperation.

### **Saving face**

In all cultures, but especially in the Turkish culture, it is important to maintain a good image of oneself before others. At all cost, one must avoid "loss of face" which is to forfeit the positive regard of others. Thus, demeaning or humiliating someone before others is an unforgivable insult; likewise, one should be careful not to get into situations where one could lose status or be humiliated. It is critical that language teachers be aware of this in their interaction with students.

## **Student attitude towards the instructor**

Turkish students have a very high regard for the teacher. The teacher is a model to imitate in terms of behavior and even appearance. (Bursalioglu, 1994). What teachers do should be emulated because they are the educated ones in this society, and education is very highly valued. (Hesabcioglu, 1994).

## **Implications for language learning when adults are the students**

Especially for adults, one risks a "loss of face" if there is pressure to make strange utterances in an alien language. Since one is almost certain to make mistakes if the instructor demands speaking on cue, students are often traumatized in a traditional language classroom. It is difficult to believe that any adult would continue to attend the traditional language class where almost from the first meeting, one must produce alien utterances on cue. TPR should be ideal for students of all ages since the risk of "losing face" is zero. The class is risk-free because there is no demand from the instructor to produce utterances in the target language.

## **Turks are a kinesthetic people**

Turkey is a high contact culture. People like to touch each other, according to the situation and relationship involved (Kosay, 1944). They use their hands, and bodies in various forms of non-verbal communication. This could be an advantage since TPR is unique for language-body conversation. Someone gives a direction in the target language and someone else responds (i.e., "If I pick up a book from my desk, run to the chalkboard and write your name.")

## **A strong oral tradition**

Turkish people have a long tradition of listening to stories that are said or read aloud. This could work to my advantage since one way to make a transition from listening comprehension with TPR to speaking, reading and writing is story telling. In the references, see the books by Todd Mc Kay and Blaine Ray.

## **Summary**

I hypothesize that James Asher's Total Physical Response or TPR will be a successful tool with Turkish language learners of all ages because of (a) the strong group ethos of working together, (b), the kinesthetic orientation of touching, and (c) the importance of never "loosing face" since there is no demand to produce alien utterances on cue from the teacher. Other factors in Turkish culture are also compatible with TPR such as the traditional respect given to the teacher who is an authority figure. Hence, students are apt to cooperate with novel behavior when the instructor asks students to be silent and act quickly when given as direction in the target language.

I was apprehensive that some other features in the Turkish school culture might seriously block learning any English with TPR. For example, students expect to read from a book, copy on paper, and memorize whatever the instructor says to memorize. Now with TPR, the "comfort zone" of the student will be removed and replaced with a new role for the instructor and the student. Will it work? Would there be insurmountable issues that I must cope with in planning any lesson. I was frankly anxious.

## **The results: Here is what I actually discovered**

I applied TPR with students between the ages of 11 and 16 in a private school. Twelve hours of each week was used for TPR. I used TPR to prepare students before they ever opened a book. In preparation for the first TPR lesson, I told the students that they were going to learn English in a way different from language education in other schools. They would be learning English in a way that was similar to how they learned Turkish. I made it clear to them that they were not expected to speak at the early stages. (Dr. James C. Davidheiser who uses TPR to teach German in an American high school successfully orients his students by showing a video demonstration of students between the ages of 17 and 60 acquiring German with TPR. The title is: Strategy for Second Language Learning." Students are excited to see that at the end of the course they will actually be conversing in German.)

## **The first stage in my Turkish experiment**

In the first stage, I asked my students to observe me while I gave myself a command in English and then acted it out. The students listened and watched as I uttered one English direction after another such as: Stand, Sit. Stand. Walk. Stop. Turn. Walk. Stop. Walk. Turn, and Sit. I spoke slowly and distinctly.

## **The second stage**

The classroom was big and crowded, so for the second stage; I called some volunteers to the front of the class. This time I gave the commands and the volunteers acted them out. The rest of the class just listened and watched the performance. Students at their desks looked curious as they watched in silence.

## **The third stage**

In the third stage, I sent the volunteers back to their seats and asked the whole class to act out many commands from where they were seated. This is possible once you expand one word utterances into more complex patterns such as:

Point to the ceiling Point to the floor. Point to the chalkboard. Point to your desk. Point to the desk of a classmate. Touch your desk. Touch the desk of a classmate. Touch your head. Hold up your pencil. Put down the pencil and hold up a book. Put down the book and hold up a piece of paper. Put down the paper; pick up the pencil in your left hand and the book in your right hand.

After some practice, I felt that the students were ready to act out the commands individually, so I asked for a volunteer. The volunteer came to the front of the class and responded perfectly to the commands. I was amazed that the students were not only understanding English in a brief time, but also enjoying the lesson. I was delighted that every time I asked for a new volunteer more hands went up. Here is the unexpected bonus: The students had fun because they were physically involved. I knew they understood because they acted out the commands correctly. The students were relaxed because they were not expected to talk unless they felt ready to talk. (As an aside, Asher and Garcia recommend that you invite two or more students to perform rather than just one student. The reason: Students seem to feel that there is "safety in numbers." They are apt to be more comfortable performing with the company of other students.)

## **Motivation was high**

Motivation was extraordinarily high. Students competed to demonstrate their comprehension. At the end of each lesson I wrote the commands and the vocabulary on the chalkboard. Students seemed contented as they copied the information in their notebooks. They seemed to enjoy being able to write the now familiar English utterances in their notebooks. This was a definite "hit."

## **And now here is an unexpected bonus**

After each lesson, I looked out the window to the playground and saw the children giving each other the commands in English and having fun acting them out. This transfer of learning from the boundaries of the classroom to the playground was something one does not see from students in a traditional language class. The sight would "warm any instructor's heart."

## **How long they retained the information**

My students continually demonstrated long-term retention because every week I was able to expand directions into a long, complex sequence that students could act out at their seats such as this: You are writing a letter with your pencil, but it is not writing very well. Look at the point of your pencil. Feel it with your thumb. Pick up your pencil case and open it. Take out your pencil sharpener. Hold the pencil sharpener in one hand and the pencil in the other hand. Put the pencil into the pencil sharpener. Sharpen the pencil by turning it. Take the pencil out and feel its point. Clean the pencil sharpener. Put the pencil sharpener into the pencil case and close it. Pick up the pencil and write.

Here are some other TPR activities that my students were able to perform from their seats:

Eating different kinds of fruits.

Taking a medicine.

Wrapping a gift.

Sewing on a button.

Receiving a present.

Writing a letter.

Painting a picture.

Your imagination can expand the list of TPR activities in any direction. It all seems to work. They understand. But, of course, you must be patient and act out one component at a time and then put the entire sequence together.

## **Another effective tool that works while students are seated**

I found that my students had fun working with the TPR Student Kits. I held up my kit, spoke an English direction such as "Put the boy in the bedroom with the blue walls." Students observed me and performed the same action in their kits. It is amazing how you can reorganize components to create novel sentences (ones they have never heard before) and students instantly understand. I believe this is the real test of fluency that the linguist, Noam Chomsky, talked about. Fluency is being able to understand (and later produce in speaking, reading, and writing) an unlimited number of sentences in the target language.

## **An application of TPR to Turkish Airlines**

TPR was an important component of a language program implemented at Turkish Airlines with a total of about 2,000 adult students. TPR was an exciting tool used in conjunction with other tools suggested in the books by James Asher and Ramiro Garcia. These included role-playing, skits which students created, wrote out in English and performed with other students, and games. The program also included ideas from suggestopedia by Dr. Georgi Lozanov of Bulgaria. As you know, any successful instructor has a large box of tools to work with including traditional dialogues, patterned drills, and even at a more advanced stage of "polishing" the target language-- verb conjugation. It all fits together, but each tool plays to a different hemisphere of the student's brain at different points in the educational experience. For more on teaching and brain laterality, see the references for Asher's Brainswitching: Learning on the right side of the brain and The Super School: Teaching on the right side of the brain.

## **Impressions from one instructor training employees at Turkish Airline**

I interviewed one of the instructors for Turkish Airline's language program who was a Canadian instructing 800 airline employees. The teacher noted the following about TPR: TPR sets up a huge "comfort zone" that adult students appreciate.

### **Here are some of the reasons:**

First, the teacher "broke the ice" by demonstrating with herself playing the role of the student. She listened to herself utter a direction in English and then acted it out. She spoke slowly and distinctly. From her demonstration, it was clear exactly what the teacher expected of the students. Not only was it clear, but the "instructional ball was catchable," since it was obvious to everyone that, "Hey, I can do that." In a traditional language classroom there is always the fear (that escalates to terror for many students), "No, please don't call on me to repeat what you just said in that strange language. I can't do it! Please move on to someone else."

Second, the procedure is new and interesting and risk-free since students were not expected to speak until each was ready. In a traditional language class, students are expected to speak on cue, often immediately, without the opportunity to prepare through TPR. Third, students were surprised to realize that they were learning, even though they were not reading from a book or copying from the board. It was truly a revelation.

Fourth, day after day, the student's comfort zone was expanded since they performed in groups rather than standing alone in front of the class. All of these factors combined to produce an enjoyable, exciting and successful learning experience for both the teacher and the adult students.

## **The initial response of the adult students to TPR**

It was amusement and curiosity. They became more and more enthusiastic fans as they experienced praise by the teacher and other students with clapping and comments of "very good," or "great" even when they were not yet speaking the language. They seemed to be surprised that comprehension was rewarded. Once they became aware of how TPR works, they literally fought with each other for the chance to show that they understood what was being said.

## **Some other tips from the Canadian instructor**

She discovered that she had to demonstrate the procedure very clearly, so that the meaning of the English was immediately understood. The demonstration had to show clearly what each student was expected to do. There was no ambiguity.

## **Don't hesitate to be playful**

Turkish teachers are sometimes hesitant to relax a strict demeanor, but she found that a playful attitude encouraged students to relax and feel free to play with the target language like a toy rather than cower from it as if it was a fearful, menacing monster.

## **How much reward is too much**

She praised every time a student did the smallest thing with success because she wanted to give the message that comprehension is important. Comprehension is absolutely basic preparation for speaking, reading, and writing. When students made mistakes, they were very gently shown the right response, so they did not feel embarrassed or shamed.

Reward and celebration for small achievements by employees is the formula for success of Jack Welsh, world famous CEO of an American company, General Electric. Jack is fond of saying that, "It is the little things that count. Those small victories need to be applauded."

## **Grand conclusions**

There are many language programs in Turkey today. More and more language programs start every year. For these programs, a variety of language "methods" are used. It is my observation, however, that schools and programs tend to adopt certain "methodologies" and texts without giving much thought to whether the "methodologies" and texts are appropriate, given the cultural and social context of Turkish language learners.

As a language teacher I have experimented with various "methodologies," and I conclude that the most powerful tool in my box of tools is TPR. In this paper, I developed a hypothesis regarding TPR, with special attention given to the culture of Turkish learners.

## **My personal recommendations**

I discovered that TPR can be successfully used with Turkish learners, provided, in my opinion, certain conditions are met.

## **Start with a thorough understanding of the theory and application of TPR**

You can acquire this by reading James J. Asher's *Learning Another Language Through Actions* (6th edition) and Ramiro Garcia's *Instructor's Notebook: How to apply TPR for best results* (4th edition).

## **Extensive teacher training in the application of TPR**

TPR looks simple, but to be effective, an instructor needs training, training and more training. The ideal would be to have an experienced TPR instructor as a mentor in the classroom to guide the new instructor step-by-step for many meetings until there is self-confidence and a huge comfort zone.

## **It may help to adapt TPR to the local culture**

Right now, for example, we see many programs using materials, especially text books, that have very little cultural relevance to Turkish students. Because these texts follow a teaching approach that is fashionable, like the communicative approach, teachers and administrators use these books without question. They think that because it follows a certain "methodology" that is popular, a book must be good.

## **My students loved manipulating the TPR Student Kits**

I found that the kits were effective even if two or three students gathered together and worked with a kit as they listened to me utter directions in English. They later told me that they felt they were just playing a game but they were actually learning, learning, learning.

## **No one demanded to see the English directions in print**

Even when the TPR was not accompanied by a student book, my students adjusted very easily to non-book learning. Students are more flexible than we imagine. In fact, the picture of students being prisoners of a "heavy-handed" Turkish culture may turn out to be a myth like the myth that Japanese students are too shy to perform in public or Chinese students are unshakable in their belief that they must pronounce every English utterance before performing. I suspect that when students in any culture feel safe and trust the instructor, they are enabled to be playful. Please note that there is a huge difference between being playful and being disruptive. Playfulness under the guidance of a skilled teacher is productive, but disruptive behavior is counterproductive.

TPR has more and more fans in Turkey because it works!

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