

Total Physical Response and the speaking skills development

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative research investigated the effectiveness of the TPR method while developing oral competence in an EFL socially vulnerable classroom. 17 students from 5<sup>th</sup> grade were included in the study. The sources of data comprised classroom observations, interviews and lesson plans' analysis. Despite of the usual effectiveness of the method to develop both listening and speaking skills, its feasibility relies on its systematicness while being applied. Therefore, the outcomes of the study suggest TPR could be an effective tool to include in Colegio Educadores de Chile, as long as methodological arrangements are included both in the lesson plans and classes. In doing so, strategies such as body language, chants and drills repetition would be key for students to create an alternative source of language that diminishes their use of L1, and develops their productive skills.

## **Introduction to the Research study**

### **Research context**

Colegio Educadores de Chile (CECH) is a public school located in Santiago, Chile. The institution has a current enrollment of 207 students within the Elementary and Primary sector (MIME, 2017). The school works within a socially vulnerable environment, with between 64% and 81% of students from 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade belong to this category (SIMCE, 2017). Consequently, CECH is part of the SEP (Subvención Escolar Preferencial) law, which grants schools with a high social risk condition rate (MINEDUC, 2017). In doing so, schools such as this institution are able to promote equal learning opportunities for their students regardless of their background.

### **The English Area**

Regarding the teaching of English, it is offered in each level from kindergarten until the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The methodology used by the teacher follows a textbook-based dynamic, with a strong focus on the receptive skills development. Moreover, the lessons are mostly taught in English, which benefits students from being exposed to target language (TL), yet not necessarily to develop productive skills. Therefore, and as an initiative to improve students' oral proficiency, the research question of this project is based on the Total Physical Response (TPR) method being incorporated within the subject: *How effectively does the TPR method encourage the development of speaking skills in 5<sup>th</sup> grade EFL students?*

## **Research study**

The TPR method has been selected for this Research primarily, as according to Larsen-Freeman (2008) it reduces EFL students' stress. This is an essential element to consider in a marginalised context due to external variables which may disrupt students from learning effectively. Furthermore, James J. Asher (1964, 1969) suggests that to develop speaking fluency, foreign language teachers should develop listening competence firstly. In doing so, the transition into oral production would be 'graceful' and 'non-stressful'. Therefore, the TPR method incorporation may be feasible due to students' high TL exposure and development of listening skills.

## **Overall methodology and specific methods employed in the study**

The qualitative approach has been considered to conduct this project since it has emerged as an initiative to improve 5th grade EFL students' speaking skills. In doing so, the researcher's focus is on inquiring into the effectiveness of the aforementioned strategy within a marginalised context. Hence, the data methods will serve the investigation to interpret, analyse and understand this phenomenon, (Bax, 2013) from the school's perspective rather than the researcher's (Liamputtong, 2014). Therefore, qualitative research comprises a paradigm of openness and flexibility towards an enquiry in which data-based and data-driven outcomes are the core. (Flick, 2007) However, in which it is essential to understand and to develop meaning of the context in order to broaden initial perceptions of the study subject. (Tracy, 2012).

Classroom observations, interviews and lesson plans have been considered as part of data collection. (See appendix A and D for the specific form of these tools). Classroom

observations can assist researchers to identify teaching patterns in which the educator may encourage students' use of receptive skills. In doing so, the research inquired into the classroom environment dynamics in order to compare the TPR method feasibility. Additionally, the lesson plans of the unit have been analysed to contrast the researcher's observations with the learning expectations of the lessons in theory. The lesson plans have also supported the researcher to delve into the class' objectives, resources and language skills development. The extent to what speaking and listening skills were developed has been crucial to assess the effectiveness of the TPR method for this context.

Finally, the semi-structured interviews provided an understanding on student's learning requirements based on the school context, in addition to the effectiveness of the TPR method while improving speaking skills. The interviews have followed a systemic approach that comprises the hierarchical organisation of the school. Therefore, the perspectives of the staff members, guide teacher and the student-teacher respectively, counterposed English teaching notions from divergent dimensions.

Due to the qualitative nature of this research project, triangulation was considered as an important tool to develop an understanding which tests validity and converges the data through different positions (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). Therefore, the rationale of the guide teacher, student-teacher and staff member, the lesson plans' analysis and the classroom observation's patterns were selected in order to gather information. In doing so, the researcher was able to compare and contrast what teachers think (interview), what was intended to be done (lesson plans) and what they actually did in practice (classroom observations).

Both the classroom observations and the interviews were analysed by means of thematic coding, which according to Given, (2008) is a strategy to organise and synthesize the underpinning elements of data. Therefore, the main themes present both in the interviews and lesson plans were compared with the patterns identified in the classroom observations. In doing so, the tensions found in these sources assisted the researcher to understand the school's status-quo into more detail to finally, assess the feasibility of the TPR method.

## **Research findings**

### **Interviews**

The interviews were coded considering the common elements asked among the guide teacher, student teacher and the staff member. In terms of skills' development in an EFL classroom, Speaking was unanimously selected as the most relevant one. Both listening and writing were chosen as the least developed skills.

*I consider that one of the most developed language skill in a normal lesson is writing, but also speaking, because most of the activities in the book point to these skills. The least developed skills are reading and listening. (S-T interview, 1).*

Additionally, the three respondents mentioned that the TPR method incorporation would be highly effective for the context, and that reluctance would be minimal. Also, all the interviewees believed that the TPR method was a useful tool to develop 5<sup>th</sup> grade students' speaking skills. Hence, this would suggest the feasibility of the method being applied to develop speaking skills in the school's context.

*It could be a good opportunity to improve them and engaged them with classes activities. (T interview, 6).*

## Lesson plans

The lesson plans from the unit what's the weather like? Were organised through the use of listening and speaking skills. Hence, the *Eje de comprensión oral* and the *Eje de expresión oral* were considered as the main targets to analyse the language aims of the unit. In terms of oral comprehension, students were expected to understand and identify explicit/general information in a text.

### **Eje comprensión oral**

**O.A. 1.-** Escuchar y demostrar comprensión de información explícita.

**O.A. 2.-** Identificar información general de los textos escuchados.

Additionally, students were also expected to use the vocabulary learnt during the unit through dialogues, for the oral production section. Both *ejes* were also coherent with the lesson objectives, as these were mostly focused on identifying, using and describing vocabulary respectively.

### **Eje expresión oral**

**O.A. 12.-** Participar en diálogos con pares y profesores al realizar las siguientes funciones:

**O.A. 13.-** Demostrar conocimiento y uso del vocabulario aprendido

Therefore, both the unit structure and the lesson plans denote a regular development of listening and speaking skills, which makes the TPR method incorporation more feasible.

However, even though the unit structure was coherent both with the lesson plans' objectives and skills development, these were dissimilar to the classroom observations. This may have happened as the lesson plans had been made by an ATE (Registro Público de Personas o Entidades Pedagógicas y Técnicas de

Apoyo) (MINEDUC, 2017). Therefore,

regardless of the coherence both with the unit and the curriculum, the lesson plans had not been developed considering the needs and reality of the school. This would finally suggest that disarrangements between the lesson plans' analysis and the classroom observations were likely to occur.

### **Classroom Observations**

The classroom observations patterns identified followed the Initiation-Response-Feedback structure. The initiations were divided into two main themes: Question and Statement. The Question theme followed a dynamic in which the teacher initiated the dialogue with students through a question. Consequently, students tended to answer the questions in Spanish, and the teacher gave them feedback based on the accuracy of the translation:

#### **Observation 1, 10.18 AM**

T: Today we are going to talk about clothes. What is this? (*Points at her pullover*)

Ss: Parka.

T: Yes!

Regarding the Statement theme, it followed the same response-feedback structure of the Question theme. The only variation was made in the initiation section of the pattern:

#### **Test Observation, 10.05 AM**

T: I love chocolate!

S: Le encanta el chocolate.

T: Yes!

#### **Observation 2, 10.43 AM**

T: Excellent! We are going to read what these people...

S: Leer lo que estas personas

T: Good! Are doing

S: Leer lo que estas personas están haciendo.

T: Excellent!

The IRF pattern suggested that students were highly exposed to the TL and their listening comprehension had been developed. However, students had few chances to use the language and therefore, to develop their speaking skills. This may be as the initiation themes encourage students to translate rather than to use the TL. In the case of the Question theme, students tended to answer in Spanish as they may have lacked of vocabulary to answer in English.

**Observation 2, 10.41 AM**

T: How can I say bufanda in English?

S: Bufand

T: No!

S: Scarf.

T: Yes!

Additionally, in the Statement theme students' immediate response was to translate in order to follow the classroom dynamic. Hence, students' translations and use of L1 was validated as they received feedback regardless of the language spoken. However, a slight variation in the pattern emerged during the third observation.

**Observation 3, 12.10 AM**

T: (*Shows the word "hen" in a flashcard*)

S: Hen!

Students were able to use the TL as they were shown flashcards with the picture of an animal on one side, and the name of the animal on the other side. Consequently, translations only arose when students had only seen the picture of the animal.

**Observation 3, 12.01 AM**

T: Frog. (*Makes the sound*)

Ss: Rana!

T: Hen

Ss: Gallina

T: Yes! Rabbit!

Conversely, the use of the TL was achieved when students read the names of the animals in English. This would suggest that the tool used by the teacher may define students' utterances. Even though the technique used this time changed from what students had been doing, there was no reluctance towards the use of English. Therefore, there should be no reticence either from a method such as TPR especially, if the input used is in the TL. In doing so, the feasibility of the method to improve students' skills could also be achievable.

Finally, the animal bingo activity during the third observation seemed quite dissimilar from the unit that had currently being taught. Even though there may have been several reasons for the educator to adapt the content from the unit *What's the weather like?*, it is important to mention the probable presence of the Hawthorne effect in the guide teacher due to the adaptations in the content of the unit. Accordingly, the Hawthorne effect suggests behavioral changes of the participants just because they are being observed (Hawthorne Effect, 2017).

### **Research Implications**

According to Sariyati (2013) TPR is an effective tool especially, for developing vocabulary in young learners as it lowers students' levels of anxiety and stress. Furthermore, TPR increases students' extrinsic motivation toward the foreign language (FL) learning since movement is conceived as its cornerstone (Sariyati, 2013). Students from this research project are also challenged by external variables connected to their socially-vulnerable context. Moreover, their vocabulary is reduced as students are not encouraged to use the TL, and they tend to translate into the L1 to participate in the lesson. Hence, this study suggest that TPR may help students to channel and deal with emotional variables such as anxiety and stress, as well as increasing their vocabulary, which finally scaffolds their development of speaking skills.

Conversely, Asher (1964) suggests that TPR is an effective method for learning a FL as long as it is systematic. Hence, it can be ineffective in contexts where the number of hours in which students are exposed to the TL are few (Asher, 1964). According to the national curriculum, fifth grade students have 2:15 of English per week, divided into two sessions of 90 and 45 minutes respectively (Bases Curriculares, 2017). Additionally, students tend to have random extracurricular activities which intervene with their normal schedule. Therefore, the effectiveness of the TPR method may be questioned due to the lack of a systematic implementation within the English lessons.

In a different study, Asher (1969) described the phenomenon of *Concurrency* as an implication of the TPR method. Concurrency occurs when students execute an action

before listening to commands instructed by the educator (Asher, 1969). Therefore, this action questions the effectiveness of the approach as students may simply imitate rather than understand the utterances. Students from this research project have adopted an IRF pattern in which they naturally translate into the L1. Similarly to *concurrency*, students respond to the initiation before understanding the message initiated by the teacher.

Therefore, students' FL learning may be questioned through the TPR method as instead of developing speaking skills, it may foster translation through the IRF patterns found in the classroom observations.

According to Linse (2005) TPR is a potentially useful strategy to deal with shyness as it gives students the opportunity to pantomime as a first attempt to approach the FL. The teacher is in charge of scaffolding the pantomime to the utterances level, so that students are able to practice and improve their speaking skills. Moreover, the author argues that TPR may also serve as a tool to develop students' problematic grammar structures for EFL learners through drills and games (Linse, 2005). These elements may be key to develop an alternative linguistic source for students from this research project, as they struggle with their lack of vocabulary to express themselves using the FL.

Finally, Fahrurrozi (2017) contends that TPR increases students' vocabulary as it comprises physical input through role-modeling exercises. In doing so, translations are diminished through the use of gestures since it works as comprehensible input. Therefore, 5<sup>th</sup> grade students' from this study can benefit from the TPR method incorporation since the L1 use could be exchanged for body language. In doing so, their vocabulary and speaking skills' development may be improved as body language would work as an aid for them to understand and apply the TL.

## **Conclusions**

The TPR method could be an effective approach to improve 5<sup>th</sup> grade EFL students' speaking skills in Colegio Educadores de Chile, as long as methodological arrangements are considered. Consequently, the challenge is on implementing a systematic routine in which students are able to intertwine their spoken language with their body language. In doing so, TPR would aid and scaffold 5<sup>th</sup> grade students' development of speaking skills. Finally, the new meaning that I could get from this project was that reluctance towards the TPR method was not necessarily related to the context. Therefore, the effectiveness of the method would depend on its implementation rather than on the context's shortages.

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## **Guide teacher's interview**

**Based on your experience in *Colegio Educadores de Chile*...**

- **In terms of the four communicative skills, which one/ones do you develop the most in your lessons? Which one/ones are the least developed?**
- **Based on your experience in *Colegio Educadores de Chile*, what teaching strategies encourage students' development of speaking skills? What teaching strategies hinder students' development of speaking skills?**
- **While focusing your lesson on speaking skills, in which type of activities are students more reluctant to participate? In which type of activities students participate actively?**
- **Regarding the TPR method, how effective would it be to include it with 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in *Colegio Educadores de Chile*?**
- **To what extent would students be reluctant to participate in classes being the TPR method used?**
- **How feasible it is to improve 5<sup>th</sup> grade students' speaking skills through the TPR method?**

## Appendices

### Appendix B

#### Staff member's interview

If you were an English teacher today in *Colegio Educadores de Chile...*

- In terms of the four communicative skills, which one/ones would you develop the most in your lessons? Which one/ones would be the least developed?
- Regarding the TPR method, how effective would it be to include it with 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in *Colegio Educadores de Chile*?
- To what extent would students be reluctant to participate in classes being the TPR method used?
- How feasible it is to improve 5<sup>th</sup> grade students' speaking skills through the TPR method?

## Appendices

### Appendix C Student-

#### teacher's interview

According your experience as a student-teacher in *Colegio Educadores de Chile...*

- In terms of the four communicative skills, which one/ones are the most developed in the lessons? Which one/ones are the least developed?
- Based on your experience in *Colegio Educadores de Chile*, what teaching strategies encourage students' development of speaking skills? What teaching strategies hinder students' development of speaking skills?
- While focusing the lesson on speaking skills, in which type of activities are students more reluctant to participate? In which type of activities students participate actively?
- Regarding the TPR method, how effective would it be to include it with 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in *Colegio Educadores de Chile*?
- To what extent would students be reluctant to participate in classes being the TPR method used?
- How possible it is to improve 5<sup>th</sup> grade students' speaking skills through the TPR method?

**Appendices**

**Appendix D**

**Observation Sheet**

<b>TIME</b>	<b>IRF PATTERN</b>	<b>OBSERVATIONS</b>