

## USING BODY MOVEMENTS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE

*Nuralieva Shokhistakhon*

*shoxista2021fardu@gmail.com*

*English teacher at Fergana state university*

### ABSTRACT

*The article discusses the use of the body movement in English lessons. The advantages and disadvantages of body movement are explained.*

**Keywords:** *Young learners; Movements; Total Physical Response; Sequential Learning; Writing*

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching/learning through movement is believed to be a method through which children can cognitively, emotionally and physically benefit from. It has the ability to engage and motivate learners, especially younger ones. It also positively enhances the disposition of the learner; therefore, facilitating the learning process of listening, speaking, reading and writing. **Total Physical Response** (TPR) is a great way to incorporate movement during lessons. Teachers and students use their bodies to act out or gesture the meaning of words or concepts. For example, if the lesson is about the water cycle, then the class would be using their bodies to represent the sun, rain, and evaporation.

#### **Main part**

According to former Psychology professor James Asher, learning best occurs through physical action, such as pointing, touching, drawing, singing, miming and role-play. Asher considers Total Physical Response (TPR) as the ideal tool for foreign language learning, because it consists on the use of imperatives, such as “Throw the ball to Mary”, accompanied with a certain movement, which will assist the learner’s perception of the target language by simulating a real-life situation. Therefore, TPR is very similar to our natural language learning process, since young children acquire new language through movements. Asher additionally defends that learning through movement is suitable for students of all ages and perfect for young learners at a primary school level, since children learn by doing. He further points out that TPR triggers the learner’s motivation and leads to the long-term retention of the information learned. Another author who defends the benefits of a more authentic learning environment is Paul, when she states that making abstraction more authentic facilitates learners’ perceptions: “Physically acting out knowledge to be learned or

problems to be solved makes the conceptual metaphors employed by our brains a literal reality”. In other words, when something abstract is made more concrete, learning is more effective. In order to reify a concept, Asher explains how our brains lateralize information. For instance, the right side of the brain is more receptive to new ideas and listens and communicates through physical action, whereas the left side resists change and can communicate through speech after having internalized enough of the language code. However, once the new content is internalized or reified, it will be very difficult for it to be removed or changed. So what method may be applied for students to learn in an efficient way? In the classroom, movement is a key approach to internalize new contents and it can be articulated in young learners’ lessons through several activities, such as pointing to the correct image when the teacher calls out a command (e.g. “Point to the long arms. / Point to the short arms.”). Pointing stimulates both the inner ear and cerebellar motor activity system, which is the first sensory system to mature in children. Additionally, combining speaking and movement is also an outstanding tool for teaching; it can be done through chanting and miming the lyrics of a song. Asher states that the positive atmosphere generated by game-like movements also creates a predisposition for students to learn. While they are performing a fun game, they are stimulating their motor activity system and their cognitive skills; hence, physical activities should be valued in the classroom. The reason for this lies on the fact that physical action is especially appropriate for younger learners, since it is not enough to explain reality to them. Therefore, since they perceive new information through first-hand experience, TPR is ideal for this age group. This physical response activity is what Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, referred to as constructing reality. Neuroscientific research has proven that movement and cognition are intimately connected. Understanding the brain is very important to understand why movement is so linked with learning. The cerebellum has been identified as the part of the brain that processes both learning and movement. So, learning through movement, as argued by Asher, is perfect for primary school students, since it is the age when the inner ear and cerebellar motor activity system mature. This system helps maintain balance, put thoughts into actions and coordinate movements. That is why children’s typical playground activities are valued, especially those that stimulate inner-ear motions, such as swinging, rolling, jumping and pointing. By doing these stimulating physical activities, the cognitive abilities are being stimulated. Movement is so vital that the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends its increase on a daily basis for a healthier life. According to its latest fact sheet on this issue, schools have safe spaces and facilities for students to spend

their free time actively. In line with trying to increment more physical activity, schools have the opportunity to apply more movement right in the classroom, which benefits students at a physical, intellectual and emotional level. Moreover, movement can be an effective strategy in the classroom to learn something new, consolidate something already learned and even motivate the learner to learn in a fun way. This is so, because moving oxygenates the brain, increases brain mass and cell production, and in general, fuels the mind, according to the U.S. National Library of Medicine. Movement additionally organizes the integration of new input with the already stored data; therefore, creating a perfect bridging and perception of information.

*Advantages and disadvantages of movement in the classroom*

Movement can engage students to a great extent and enhance their motivation in the classroom. It has the ability to reduce the stress typically associated with the learning of a foreign language. This approach is highly intertwined with an emotional state of informal, stress-free well-being, which facilitates learning. It is known that information learned through strong feelings is more easily perceived and recalled, as Jensen states: “Whether we get scared out of our wits or experience an ecstatic love fest, nature wants us to remember the incident that caused that reaction”. Additionally, a collective symbiosis is inevitable when applying movement in the classroom, promoting a sense of inclusion and equality among the students, because they are all performing the same motor activities. This is true even for students with special needs, those with behavioral problems and those diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), as explained by Nina Fiore, a practitioner in the educational field. Some support teaching through movement might go so far as to regulate some misbehavior, because students engage and concentrate on the motor activities. Fiore goes on to also state that incorporating movement or exercises results in students with more successful cognitive, behavioral and motivational benefits: Movement is one of the most beneficial ways for all children to engage with and retain the information they are being taught in school. It makes lessons more engaging and memorable, it helps students focus, it regulates student behavior, it helps foster inclusive environments for all children, and it makes children want to come to school every day. In line with Fiore’s statement, applying physical activities in the classroom has shown to increase students’ memory skills and helps stimulate a favorable learning atmosphere, which will lead young learners to want to repeat such learning practices. The intention of teachers when applying movements, such as TPR, is to generate pleasurable experiences to facilitate the learning process and not to promote negative experiences. So, how do positive emotions assist learning? Jensen

states that pleasurable events and body movements enhance the production of dopamine, a beneficial hormone linked with pleasure, positive emotions and cognitive functions in the human nervous system. Another supporter of the benefits resulting from positive emotions in learning experiences is Julian Edge, a senior lecturer in the International Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Edge points out that language learning is more effective and memorable through favorable events, as he puts it: “Positive emotional involvement leads to effective learning”. On the contrary, how do negative emotions affect the learning process and memory skills? Jensen states that stressful events lead to the release of harmful hormones into the nervous system, such as glucocorticoid, which in big quantities does not enhance cognitive functions; therefore, these adverse situations are not recommendable. Bearing this in mind, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends moderate exercise to enhance cognitive processing. Another possible disadvantage of implementing movement in the classroom is student unsettledness. This negative aspect might occur if students are not accustomed to performing physical activities during their lessons, in which case, the instructor should progressively apply brief physical activities to create a routine. Additionally, lack of classroom space might present an obstacle to practicing motor activities. Furthermore, physically active tasks are not recommended following playtime when students are already energized; therefore, leading to unnecessary commotion. In this case, more soothing activities are called for and movement related exercises could be later applied. Nevertheless, the implementation of motor activities is recommended and it should be pursued in the classroom, since it greatly contributes to learners’ well being at a physical, emotional and cognitive level. It can also play an important role in the development of several skills, namely writing. Bearing this in mind, the following section will consider the acquisition of writing, its importance, and how movement can be an aid to it.

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