

Analysis of the Implementation of Total Physical Response in Teaching English Listening Skills to Autism Students at SKH Negeri 01 Cilegon

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Abstract

In recent years, the integration of children with autism into regular classrooms has garnered considerable attention, highlighting the need for effective educational practices tailored to their specific needs. This research aims to enhance English listening abilities in autistic children using the Total Physical Response (TPR) technique in the SMP-C grade at SKH Negeri 01 Cilegon. This research used a qualitative descriptive technique, utilizing observational and participant data to examine the implementation, advantages, and efficacy of Total Physical Response (TPR) in an inclusive classroom environment. The results indicate that Total Physical Response (TPR), which integrates physical activity with verbal guidance, significantly improves students' listening comprehension and memory. This approach is particularly beneficial for autistic learners who react well to tactile and visual stimuli. TPR activities, including gestures, visual aids, practical tasks, and objects, enhance classroom engagement and accommodate varied learning requirements. Students demonstrated enhanced knowledge, increased engagement, and elevated self-confidence, especially among those exhibiting greater collaboration. For students who exhibited reluctance or minimal responsiveness, supporting techniques such as repetition, explicit instructions, and positive reinforcement were crucial in enhancing their involvement. The study emphasizes the difficulties in accommodating diverse student reactions, highlighting the necessity for instructor adaptability, ingenuity, and perseverance. Notwithstanding these limitations, TPR has shown efficacy in enhancing listening abilities and fostering the physical, social, and emotional development of autistic adolescents. In conclusion, TPR provides a comprehensive, learner-centric methodology that enhances the accessibility, engagement, and significance of English language acquisition for children with autism.

Keywords: Autistic student, EFL learners, listening skills, teaching English, total physical response.

INTRODUCTION

English has long been established as a compulsory subject in Indonesian senior high schools, aiming to equip students to communicate effectively globally. As an international language, English proficiency not only facilitates access to wider educational resources but also enhances students' opportunities in both academic and professional spheres. The incorporation of English into the Indonesian national curriculum—dating back to the 1950 curriculum for senior high school and the 1953 curriculum for junior high school—reflects its recognised importance. From its early implementation, English instruction has emphasised the development of core language skills, particularly listening, reading, and writing, as foundational to student success.

Among the four language skills, listening is crucial to language acquisition. Silviyanti (2014) asserts that listening is essential for students at all levels, as it underpins comprehension and the ability to engage meaningfully in communicative situations. Gaw (2002) further emphasises that listening, as a vital element of human communication, is significantly influenced by contextual factors and therefore requires strategic focus within instructional settings. Samuel (2015) notes that listening is employed more frequently than other language skills, used approximately five times more than reading and writing, and twice as often as speaking, underscoring its central role in daily communication.

The importance of listening skills becomes even more apparent when teaching English to students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Listening serves as a foundation for understanding instructions, assimilating lesson content, and participating in social interactions within the classroom. However, students with ASD often face challenges such as difficulty in processing auditory information, maintaining sustained attention, and responding appropriately to verbal stimuli. As a result, English instruction for students with autism necessitates tailored approaches that accommodate their specific learning needs.

One pedagogical approach deemed effective in this context is the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, developed by Asher (1965), which integrates verbal commands with physical movement. The TPR method aligns with the natural language acquisition processes and offers a multi-sensory experience that can enhance comprehension and memory retention. For students with autism, who often benefit from structured, visual, and kinesthetic learning, TPR presents a particularly suitable

method. Nuraeni (2019) affirms that TPR facilitates understanding by enabling learners to respond physically to instructions, thereby reducing anxiety and promoting a more relaxed and supportive learning environment.

Previous studies have explored various strategies for teaching English to autistic students in Indonesia. Setiadi (2017) emphasises the significance of both direct and indirect communication by English teachers in supporting students with ASD. Romadlon (2017) highlights the potential of speech therapy in assisting autistic students in acquiring English language skills. However, existing research predominantly focuses on vocabulary enrichment and speaking skills (Firdaus et al., 2022; Chairinasuha, 2020), while scholarly attention to developing listening skills remains limited.

Given this gap in the literature, the present study aims to examine the implementation of the TPR method in teaching English listening skills to students with autism, particularly within the inclusive educational setting of SKH Negeri 01 Cilegon. The school's commitment to inclusivity and its proven track record in supporting learners with special needs make it an appropriate site for this investigation. Preliminary observations indicate that while students respond to physical prompts associated with verbal commands, challenges such as restlessness, lack of eye contact, and difficulty sustaining attention persist (Kulinski, 2020). This underscores the necessity for a structured and responsive instructional approach.

Accordingly, this study seeks to analyse the process and effectiveness of TPR in enhancing the listening skills of autistic students in an inclusive junior secondary education setting, while identifying the pedagogical advantages perceived by educators who implement this method.

METHODS

This research used a qualitative method with a qualitative descriptive approach to collect data on implementing Total Physical Response in Teaching English Listening Skills to students with Autism. The location for carrying out this research is SKH Negeri 01 Cilegon Jl. Elang Perum BCK Blok E Rt. 004 Rw. 009. The research subjects were three autistic students in SMA-c in the academic year 2023/2024 and an English teacher at SKH Negeri 01 Cilegon. The study's objective was to teach listening skills to autistic students through the Total Physical Response method. This research consisted of four parts: interviewing and observation. In the observation, the researcher directed visits to the research location through observation techniques. The researcher used an observation sheet to obtain valid and accurate data according to the reality observed by the researcher. Therefore, the researcher conducted the interviews with an English teacher. In this research, the researcher used data triangulation to determine the credibility of the data. The researcher compared data found from observations and data obtained from interviews.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Result

Data were collected across four sessions. The first session focused on meeting and greeting the students, introducing the researcher, and obtaining students' consent for observation. This initial meeting aimed to minimise discomfort from the presence of an outsider. The second to fourth sessions, each lasting 45 minutes, involved the teacher delivering English listening lessons to autistic students using the Total Physical Response (TPR) method. The researchers observed and recorded the process during these sessions and took detailed field notes.

The TPR method was implemented by giving commands associated with physical movements and object manipulation. The commands and students' responses were categorized into four types, as outlined by Asher (1968): (1) moving the whole body or specific parts of the body, (2) moving objects, (3) moving abstractions or visuals, and (4) action sequences based on daily routines.

(1) The Implementation of Total Physical Response (TPR) in Teaching English Listening Skills to Autistic Students

a. Moving the Whole Body or Specific Parts

The teacher demonstrated simple physical commands, such as "*Get up, please!*" and "*Clap your hands!*" through gestures. Initially, students were required to repeat the instructions to follow them accurately. Over time, through repeated demonstrations and encouragement, students became more confident and able to perform actions individually and together. Songs like "*If You Are Happy and You Know It*" were utilized to reinforce actions, with students showing increased participation and understanding through the familiar routine. Student D showed the highest enthusiasm and quickly followed the teacher's gestures. Student F, although quieter, could follow instructions after additional guidance, while Student C required more encouragement but eventually participated with the support of classmates.

b. Moving objects

Students were instructed to touch specific body parts (e.g., "*Touch your head!*" "*Touch your knees!*") while the teacher modeled each action. Songs like "*Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes*" supported this learning. Students, especially Student D, responded enthusiastically. Student F often needed physical prompts, while Student C initially observed but became more engaged over time.

c. Moving Abstractions or Visuals

The teacher used visual aids, such as picture cards, alongside verbal instructions to enhance comprehension. For example, when showing a card labelled “*Brush your teeth*,” students mimicked the action after observing the teacher. This multisensory approach helped understanding, particularly for students who needed more concrete representations of abstract actions.

d. Action Sequences Based on Daily Routines

Commands relating to students’ everyday tasks, such as washing hands, eating, and cleaning up, were incorporated into lessons. The teacher modeled each task while verbalising the English command. Students responded more actively to familiar daily activities, demonstrating improved comprehension and physical coordination.

Consistent repetition and modelling were key strategies that enabled students to gradually develop better English listening comprehension and motor coordination, which were aligned with TPR principles.

(2) Students’ Response to the TPR Method

The three autistic students responded differently to the TPR method, reflecting their differing personalities and learning needs.

1. Student D was the most enthusiastic and actively participated in receptive and expressive language skills. He was quick to follow verbal commands, mimic gestures, and even attempt verbal repetitions of the instructions. In activities like “*Pak Wahyu says*” (a modified “*Simon Says*” game), Student D consistently engaged and correctly followed the rules.
2. Student F initially appeared passive and absorbed in his world. However, he could follow instructions correctly with repeated modelling and occasional physical guidance (e.g., guiding his hands). Student F responded better after observing Student D’s examples.
3. At the beginning, Student C displayed shyness and hesitancy, often daydreaming and observing peers rather than actively participating. Nevertheless, with peer encouragement and teacher patience, Student C gradually engaged in activities, especially during group games involving movement and music.

Students showed increased enthusiasm and participation throughout the sessions, especially during game-based and musical activities. Although differences in responsiveness persisted, the TPR method effectively enhanced their comprehension of English commands and supported their motor-sensory engagement in a positive and enjoyable learning environment.

B. Discussion

This study’s findings reveal that implementing the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in teaching English listening skills to autistic students was generally effective. The teacher applied TPR through verbal commands and physical movements, aligning with Asher’s (1969) theory that TPR enhances language comprehension by engaging students in structured, enjoyable physical activities. This approach increased students’ participation and understanding, demonstrating that multisensory learning strategies benefit autistic learners.

Throughout the observations, repetition and teacher modelling were evident in the successful application of TPR. Activities such as “*stand up*,” “*clap your hands*,” and singing “*If You Are Happy and You Know It*” exemplified how physical actions reinforce language acquisition. Supporting studies (Putri & Prastikawati, 2021; Nugraha & Astuti, 2020; Herlina & Sari, 2023) further affirm that repeated practice and direct demonstrations significantly strengthen students’ ability to internalize new language patterns.

Students’ responses to TPR varied based on their characteristics. For example, Student D showed quick comprehension and enthusiasm, while Students F and C required more repetition, physical assistance, and emotional support. These variations align with the notion that autistic students possess highly individualised learning needs (Smith & Iadarola, 2015; Agustinus Tandilo Mamma, 2024). Therefore, differentiated instruction—through personalised approaches, repeated practice, and supportive interactions—is essential for optimising the effectiveness of TPR.

Moreover, using visual aids, such as picture cards representing daily activities, proved valuable in bridging verbal commands with concrete understanding. This visual support aligns with findings from Reydehl (2022), emphasising that visual routines enhance communication and comprehension in autistic students. By integrating TPR with routine-based activities, teachers provide a structured and predictable learning environment, reducing anxiety and promoting engagement.

Despite the successes, challenges were also identified. Some students, like Student C, exhibited shyness and required more extended adaptation periods, while others, like Student F, faced attention difficulties and needed simplified instructions and frequent reinforcement. These challenges highlight the need for teachers to be flexible and continuous in their adjustment to meet their students’ diverse needs.

Overall, the teacher effectively implemented the four main categories of TPR: whole-body movement, partial body movement, visual abstractions, and routine action sequences. TPR’s adaptive, student-centred application contributed significantly to

improving students' listening skills. Although the pace of progress varied, all students demonstrated positive development, indicating that TPR is a promising method for teaching English listening skills in inclusive classrooms, especially for students with autism spectrum disorder.

In conclusion, this study underscores that the success of TPR is not solely dependent on the method itself but heavily relies on the teacher's sensitivity, flexibility, and ability to personalise learning experiences based on each student's unique needs. When thoughtfully adapted, TPR can provide autistic students meaningful, engaging, and practical opportunities to develop their English listening skills.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that implementing the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in teaching English listening skills to students with autism positively impacts the learning process. Combining physical movements and verbal instructions effectively supports students' comprehension, catering to their learning needs.

The advantages of the TPR method include increased student engagement, improved self-confidence, and enhanced ability to understand and follow English commands, particularly when supported by repetition and clear demonstrations. Incorporating body movements, visual aids, real objects, and routine-based tasks creates a multisensory learning experience that is relevant and enjoyable for autistic students.

Despite these strengths, challenges remain regarding students' diverse responses and abilities. Some students require more intensive support, such as physical guidance or simplified instructions, highlighting the importance of the teacher's adaptability, creativity, and patience in the learning process.

Overall, the TPR method not only improves autistic students' understanding of English vocabulary and phrases but also supports the development of their motor skills, social interaction abilities, and self-confidence. With consistent repetition, tailored strategies, and a responsive approach to individual needs, TPR holds significant potential for further supporting the learning development of students with special needs.

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