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THE ROLE OF LISTENING IN DEVELOPING PRIMARY STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS

Abstract: This paper aims to explore the role of listening in developing primary students' speaking skills. For the purpose of this paper an experimental research was conducted in the primary school “Milica Milošević” in Jagnjilo. A sample of ten students of the first grade, age 7, participated in this study by doing a speaking test and a listening comprehension test. The researcher used the instrument of assessment to measure the effectiveness of the TPR method in the form of a pre-test and post-test to assess changes. In addition, the post-test was also carried out regarding the listening comprehension, while pre-test and post-test dealt only with oral production of vocabulary items. The study shows that TPR method influences long-term retention to a great extent and is effective in acquiring new vocabulary items. Findings also indicate that TPR can be an effective tool to help raise an affective filter and motivate students to be more active. Due to the fact that during a learning-teaching activity, students do not only listen to the teacher's explanations, they become active by responding to the commands from the teacher or they could give commands as well.

Keywords: listening skills, Total Physical Response, long-term retention, oral production.

1. INTRODUCTION

Out of the four basic language skills, listening, a passive, receptive skill, has long been neglected by researchers. Only in recent years, with the development and increasing use of digital technologies in teaching, the skill of listening and listening comprehension has gained importance. We listen and do, we listen and point, we listen and draw etc. Speaking emerges much later, when we are ready. Without pressure we develop our speaking skills as well. A few years will pass before we begin to understand the written word. The same pattern should be followed when teaching the target language to young learners. Physical activity is a very important aspect in child's development both physically and intellectually. By using the Total Physical Response method (Asher 1968) in teaching the target language we can be sure that we chose the best method for young learners because it is fun, it

is relevant and it works. When we add songs, chants and rhymes on top of it, the success is guaranteed. Soon the speaking will emerge and open the door to a whole new world of a foreign language.

The skills of listening and speaking in a foreign language are inextricably linked. In Serbian teaching context listening and speaking dominate the first two years of English language teaching in primary schools (*Education Gazette* 2018). This is the precious time for teachers to develop those skills in their students and to lay down the foundation for further language development. It is also the perfect time to embed the love for English language learning through fun activities incorporating listening (songs, chants, stories, etc.) and speaking (short answers, simple rhymes, chunks of speech, simple sentences, etc.).

2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

A lot of research has been done in the field of listening in the past. Richards (2008), Nunan (1998), Shin and Crandall (2013), Morley (1991) are just a few of the researchers whose work is essential for the purpose of this paper. The role of listening has changed in recent years: “In recent years, listening has also been examined in relation not only to comprehension but also to language learning” (Richards 2008). In *Teaching Listening and Speaking from Theory to Practice*, Richards considers listening from two different perspectives: listening as comprehension and listening as acquisition. Listening as comprehension views listening as the process of understanding spoken language while it is being spoken. Decoding the sounds and linguistic characteristics of spoken language, comprehending vocabulary and grammar, determining the speaker’s intentions, and isolating the key ideas and supporting information are all part of listening comprehension. According to this viewpoint, listening is a crucial receptive skill that students need in order to understand and participate in communication (Richards 2008).

Listening as acquisition acknowledges that learners can pick up new vocabulary, grammatical structures, pronunciation patterns and discourse methods through exposure to spoken language. Listening input plays a crucial role in shaping learners’ language competence and helps them internalize linguistic elements and develop their overall language proficiency. In this sense, listening is not just a skill to be practiced but also a process of acquiring language subconsciously (Richards 2008).

According to Nunan (1998: 1), listening is often either overlooked or undervalued, even though over 50% of the time that students spend learning a foreign language will be through listening. In his research Nunan describes the nature of the listening process stating that two views have dominated over the last twenty years. Those are bottom-up processing view and top-down interpretation view. The bottom-up processing model assumes that listening is a process of decoding the

sounds that one hears in a linear fashion, from the smallest meaningful units to complete texts, in which meaning itself is derived as the last step in the process (Ibid.).

Some examples of listening activities for young learners that focus on bottom-up processing skills are match the word and a picture, fill in the blanks of a transcript etc. (Shin, Crandall 2013).

Top-down view suggests that the listener actively reconstructs the original meaning of the speaker using incoming sounds as clues. In this process, the listener uses prior knowledge of the context and situation within which the listening takes place to make sense of what he or she hears (Nunan 1998). Top-down processing starts with schemata or background knowledge based on the context of the communication. Instead of focusing on linguistic parts of the utterance, learners learn how to gain meaning from the context and might be able to predict what will be said (Shin, Crandall 2013). For young learners it is important to help them with the context by using pictures or realia in pre-listening tasks.

Nunan (1998) points out that an important theoretical foundation to the ‘top-down’ approach is schema theory. Schema theory is based on the notion that past experiences lead to the creation of mental frameworks that help us make sense of new experiences. Schema building tasks should precede the listening.

Morley (1991: 82) argues that listening is the most common communicative activity in daily life: “On average, we can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write.”

As it is the most used of four skills, it is essential to help our learners to be able to listen well and gain meaning from listening input. It is also important to incorporate authentic listening skills that children do in their real lives (Shin, Crandall 2013). In *Teaching Young Learners English – from theory to practice*, Shin and Crandall give some important considerations for teaching listening also describing bottom-up and top-down approaches as well as the importance of schemata (background knowledge).

According to Shin (TEYL channel 2018), there is an enormous amount of listening in English classes for young learners. It is the main source of communication between teacher and young learners. It is also important for obtaining comprehensible input that is necessary for language development. Therefore, teachers of young learners have to be very conscious about their approach to giving students listening input. Shin describes several principles for designing listening activities for young learners from preparing teacher talk, using activities reflecting real-life listening, keeping listening active with listening tasks to developing guesswork strategies (Shin, Crandall 2013).

Crnogorac Stanišljević (2018) has done a qualitative research “Compensation Strategies in Developing the Language Skill of Listening in Teaching the English Language” at the University of Novi Sad. She argues that the development of listening skills is facilitated for students by the use of language learning strate-

gies, especially compensation strategies. The results of the research show that the students with advanced knowledge of English use compensation strategies, but they are not aware of them and they do not know how much the strategies can help them in mastering the listening skill (Ibid.).

Mičić and Čajka (2013) deal with listening strategies in higher education, mainly providing an overview of research with a focus on current problems in English language teaching in Serbia. Ćirković-Miladinović (2019) deals with affective strategies while Radić-Bojanić (2013) studies social strategies in the acquisition of metaphorical vocabulary of the English language. Tišma's research (2016) deals with improving comprehension skills relying on metacognitive strategies.

Regarding the research in the region, Patekar (2013) from Rijeka dealt with listening strategies in English language teaching. Patekar (Ibid.) brings the literature overview focused on the problems of listening in foreign language, finding the differences in using listening strategies, as well as determining the characteristics of successful listeners. In the second part of his research Patekar (Ibid.) talks about teaching listening strategies in foreign language curriculum.

When we compare the volume of research it is evident that we lack research in the field of listening in Serbia. As it is an irreplaceable technique in the first two years of teaching English to primary school students, it is of utmost importance to further develop the research in this area. This paper will focus on listening through actions and movement, the so called TPR (Total Physical Response) method.

3. TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE

The Total Physical Response method was designed to improve the listening comprehension of a foreign language by Asher in the late 1960's (Asher 1968). The idea was to give a physical response, to move your body when you hear the command in a foreign language. It is widely used by teachers of primary students as it provides a pleasant atmosphere for learning, lowering the affective filter at the same time. It is a combination of language and gesture which makes language acquisition memorable and natural. One important aspect of this method is that students are not expected to speak while performing actions, thus avoiding pressure for oral production and creating stress-free atmosphere (Asher 2007, in: Savić 2014).

For Asher, comprehension is very important and it should be developed before speaking if we want to succeed in learning a foreign language. Asher explains that everywhere in the world, while acquiring mother tongue, children develop comprehension first and speaking comes much later. He also points out that comprehension and speaking are located in different areas of the brain. Speaking comes from Broca's area in the frontal lobe of the left brain, while comprehension happens in Wernicke's area in the temporal lobe (Asher 2007).

In the same manner Asher warns about brain overload that can happen when teachers ask students to listen and repeat at the same time, because both brain areas (Broca's and Wernicke's) are active at the same time which has a slow learning and short-term retention as a consequence. Asher points out that translation does not help as it does not create believable experiences for students, while TPR is an alternative which creates facts that help with long-term comprehension and retention (Ibid.).

As Savic (2014) asserts, it is of great importance to use gestures with listening comprehension in order to increase long-term retention: "Brain processes information faster and accepts it as reliable if listening is followed by movement (right brain learning), without speaking or translation (left brain learning)" (Asher 2007, in: Savic 2014: 448).

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. PROCEDURE

The research was carried out with seven-year-old students (first grade) of primary school in Jagnjilo, Serbia. This group was chosen because they have just started learning English language and the TPR method is suitable for learning new vocabulary items. As the school has two first grades in two separate villages, one group served as control group and the other as experimental. The researcher used the instrument of assessment test to measure the effectiveness of the TRP method in the form of a pre-test and post-test to assess changes. The test consisted of six vocabulary items that children were asked to identify. At the beginning of the lesson the researcher organized an oral pre-test. Students were asked to name the objects in the picture. As the objects were mainly unknown to students, very few could name one object, not more than that. While trying to give an answer, many gave wrong but approximate answers: instead of 'a notebook' they said it is 'a book', instead of 'a teacher', they said it is 'you' (pointing to the researcher), etc. In addition, the post-test was also carried out regarding the listening comprehension (choosing the image of a named vocabulary item) while pre-test and post-test dealt with oral production of vocabulary items. The research was small-scale regarding the number of participants. The number of participants was limited as the number of students attending the school where the research was carried out is small. Only ten students participated, five in each group: two girls and three boys in the experimental group and one girl and four boys in the control group. The small number of students was due to the total number of students in the class. The time frame for the research was short, five days from the beginning of the experiment till the end. The purpose of the pre-test was to determine how familiar students were with the

vocabulary items before the lesson. The post-test was carried out at the end of the lesson and again after five days to check the long-term retention.

4.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Is TPR more effective in acquiring new vocabulary items compared to traditional teaching?

Does TPR contributes to a long-term retention of vocabulary items?

Is TPR more effective in oral production or listening comprehension?

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the research are given in the form of tables for both the control and the experimental group, as well as for both oral production and listening comprehension. The total number of vocabulary items to be learned is six as it is a standard number for this age in English curriculum for Serbian teaching context.

ORAL PRODUCTION

Name the objects (a notebook, a bag, a teacher, a table, a lunchbox, a classroom).

Table 1. The scores of the control group (oral)

Student	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
Before standard lesson	0/6	1/6	0/6	0/6	1/6	0,07
After standard lesson	0/6	3/6	0/6	0/6	1/6	0,13
Five days after standard lesson	0/6	3/6	0/6	0/6	2/6	0,16

Table 2. The scores of the experimental group (oral)

Student	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
Before TPR lesson	0/6	0/6	0/6	1/6	1/6	0,07
After TPR lesson	3/6	3/6	0/6	3/6	4/6	0,43
Five days after TPR lesson	2/6	4/6	1/6	5/6	5/6	0,57

It is worth pointing out that both control and experimental group had the same mean result of a pre-test (0,07), which suggests that the groups were even at the beginning of a procedure, regarding the background knowledge.

What followed was a typical PPP lesson with control group where the researcher presented the vocabulary items using visual input, practiced the correct

pronunciation with each student and at the end of the lesson they interacted with each other using the vocabulary items.

The researcher carried out a TPR lesson with experimental group, involving the active participation of the students. They were standing in the classroom, listening to the teacher presenting vocabulary items and miming it. After miming together with the teacher, the students played a few games involving moving freely around the classroom, miming and guessing the items.

After the lesson the same test was given to both control and experimental group. The results showed that students in experimental group where TPR method was applied, managed to memorize more vocabulary items from the pictures than students in control group (without TPR).

After five days the same oral test was given to both groups. The results of the experimental group showed that students could name more items than on the second test (immediately after the lesson), except for one student that named one item less. While students in the control group showed the same level of knowledge (as on the test immediately after the lesson), except for one student that named one item more. What is interesting is that students from the experimental group used the practiced movements from TPR activities in order to recall the name of the item from the picture.

This clearly shows that TPR method influences long term retention to a great extent and is more effective in acquiring new vocabulary items.

LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Worksheet: School time

Listen and circle (a bag, a notebook, a lunchbox, a teacher, a classroom)

*The sixth vocabulary item has already been circled as an example

Table 3. The scores of the control group (written)

Student	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
After 1st standard lesson	2/5	5/5	3/5	5/5	5/5	0,80
Five days after standard lesson	1/5	5/5	2/5	5/5	5/5	0,72

Table 4. The scores of the experimental group (written)

Student	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
After 1st TPR lesson	1/5	4/5	1/5	5/5	5/5	0,64
Five days after TPR lesson	5/5	5/5	4/5	5/5	5/5	0,96

After the first lesson, a listening comprehension test (recognition test) was given to the students. The students were required to listen and circle the item they hear. The results showed that students in both experimental and control group could recognize and circle more items than they could name orally. Control group

students could recognize and circle more items than students in experimental group after the first lesson, which was surprising. Although after five days experimental group students' results were almost 100%, with only one student being unable to circle all the correct items (only one wrong answer given), control group students showed a slight decrease in number of correct answers.

On this sample, the research has shown that TPR method is more effective in listening comprehension, i.e. recognition of items, than in oral production.

This finding is supported by a previous study, conducted by Shi from China, where the researcher gives a comprehensive list of advantages of the TPR teaching method. Another study by Nuareni (2019) from Indonesia states that after implementing TPR method periodically, students were very enthusiastic, focused, and interactive in the learning activities, especially in vocabulary and comprehension.

6. CONCLUSION

As anticipated, this research has shown that TPR is a very powerful tool for teachers of primary school students. It has also shown that the TPR method influences a long-term retention of vocabulary items, so it would be a useful technique to apply when presenting new vocabulary for the first time. The best way to develop students' speaking skills is through listening and movement. In the same manner Savić (2014) points out that the potential of TPR is to develop not only children's listening comprehension, but also a solid vocabulary and grammar foundation for speaking and communication activities.

Since the foreign language learning programme in the first and second grade of primary school in Serbia is free from writing and reading, as well as explicit explanations of grammar rules, this is a valuable period for encouraging and getting students used to spontaneously applying the learned words and expressions in everyday situations in and outside the classroom.

Pantomime (as a type of drama technique), as well as the method of TPR, are very popular and effective, not only at this age but later as well. They are especially suitable for students with kinaesthetic learning style who often have problems with concentration (translating the spoken word into movement and vice versa). These techniques are suitable for introducing and practicing all kinds of words (nouns – parts of the body, animals, toys, etc.; verbs – get up, sit down, raise an object, lower an object etc.; adjectives to describe states and feelings – happy, sad, hungry, thirsty etc.).

The method most often used in English language classrooms in Serbia is communicative method that includes listening and showing, listening and repeating, listening and circling, role playing, simulations, singing songs, TPR, acting, pantomime, etc. The fact that the two aspects addressed in this paper are a huge part of school curriculum justifies further research in more details.

Regarding the results of this research, the influence of TPR in students' listening skill can be seen from the significant increase of the pre-test and post-test scores of the students of the experimental group. Although the scores of the control group increased as well, the rate of the increase was not as high as the one of the experimental group. This finding is supported by Asher (1968), as mentioned that TPR method was designed to improve listening comprehension of a foreign language by having subjects give a physical response when they heard a foreign utterance. TPR encourages the students to be more active. It is because during learning-teaching activity students do not only listen to the teacher's explanations, but they become active by responding to the commands from the teacher or they could give commands as well.

For further research, researchers can observe the influence of TPR on different ages and investigate the influence of TPR on other language skills, such as reading and writing. Another suggestion is to do research on a larger scale, with a different sample size as it can yield more reliable results. The limitation of this paper is in the number of participants due to the small number of children in the first grade.

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ОШ „Милица Милошевић”

Јагњило

УЛОГА СЛУШАЊА У РАЗВОЈУ ГОВОРНИХ ВЕШТИНА УЧЕНИКА ОСНОВНИХ ШКОЛА

Резиме: Овај рад има за циљ да истражи улогу слушања у развоју говорних вештина ученика основних школа. За потребе овог рада спроведено је експериментално истраживање у основној школи. Узорак од 10 ученика првог разреда, старости 7 година, учествовао је у овом истраживању радећи усмени тест и тест разумевања слушања. Истраживач је користио инструмент процене за мерење ефикасности ТПР методе (методе тоталног физичког одговора – *Total Physical Response* – TPR) у облику пре-теста и пост-теста за процену промене. Поред тога, спроведен је и пост-тест у погледу разумевања слушања, док су се пре-тест и пост-тест бавили само усменом продукцијом вокабулара. Студија показује да ТПР метода у великој мери утиче на дуготрајно задржавање и да је ефикасна у усвајању нових речи. Налази такође показују да ТПР може бити ефикасан алат који помаже у уклањању афективног филтера и мотивише ученике да буду активнији на часу. То је зато што током активности учења и наставе ученици не само да слушају објашњења наставника, већ постају активни одговарајући на команде наставника или могу да дају команде.

Кључне речи: вештина слушања, тотални физички одговор (ТПР), дуготрајно памћење, усмена продукција.