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## From TPR to TBLT: An Evolutionary Survey

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**Abstract**

Although TBLT and TPR are two temporally distant methods of language teaching, both have some similar underlying educational principles. Believing in the unity of the origins of TBLT and TPR, this paper tried to depict this evolutionary survey which started by Asher's (1974) proposition of the relation of speech and action and gradually developed to a full-fledged, multi-dimensional instructional approach which ruled over the realm of second/foreign language learning in the present decade. Hence, in order to be faithful to an objective framework for studying these two methods, the researcher applied Rogers & Richard's (1986) trichotomous plan of method classification according to which three key aspects should be focused for each method investigation; approach (theory of the nature of language and theory of the nature of language learning), method (student's role, teacher's role, the role of instructional materials, and assessment facets), and procedure (classroom techniques and practices). All of these elements have been focused respectively for both methods to see how TPR changed into TBLT in an evolutive movement.

## **1. Introduction**

Total physical response (TPR) is a method developed by James J. Asher (1974), a professor of psychology at San José State University, to aid learning second languages. The method relies on the assumption that during learning a second or additional language, that language is internalized through a process of code breaking similar to first language development which allows for a long period of listening and comprehension development prior to production. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) (also known as task-based language learning (TBLL), or task-based instruction (TBI)) is a recent method of instruction in the field of language acquisition. It focuses on the use of authentic language, and necessitates students to perform meaningful tasks using the target language

The underlying theory of TPR is that, adult's second language learning is similar \_at least parallel\_ to children first language acquisition. As a result, coordination of speech and action is placed at the core of emphasis in this method. Asher (1974) exploited *developmental psychology*, and *humanistic principles* of language learning for establishing his method. He also introduced “*trace theory*” of Katano (1940) as the cornerstone of his philosophy as follows:

The more often or the more intensively a memory connection is traced, the stronger the memory associations will be and the more likely it will be recalled. Retracing can be done verbally by association with motor activity (p.35).

Asher (1974) introduces three general principles for his method; firstly, there is a specific *innate bio-program* for language learning, that is, first listening competence is achieved, then speech evolves naturally and effortlessly out of it. By listening, language learners can gain a “cognitive map” of the target language. Secondly, when the *brain lateralization* process is finished different functions are defined for left and right hemispheres. TPR is based on right-brain learning. When enough right-brain hemisphere learning has taken place, then left hemisphere starts to act by producing language. And finally, *stress* intervenes learning. Lower stress would result in greater learning. First language acquisition takes place in a stress-free environment. By focusing on the meaning interpreted through movements, stress would be omitted in second language learning context. In TPR, conversation is delayed until after at least 12 sessions of learning. Theoretically it is believed that learners can assimilate optimally 12-36 new vocabularies in a single session of second language learning. Since language is taught through *commands* in TPR, verbs are central linguistic motifs.

Total physical response is a good example of comprehension-based approaches. In a review of comprehension-based approaches, Gary (1978) identified four main advantages of TPR:

- *A cognitive advantage* → better L2 learning.

- *An affective advantage* → the avoidance of stress and embarrassment which are often results from trying to produce sentences in front of others.
- *An efficiency advantage* → a comprehension-based approach works equally well with low and high aptitude learners.
- *A utility advantage* → teaching listening skills helps a learner become functionally capable of using L2 and also enables him to continue his language study independent of his teacher.

Task-based language teaching is predicated on the principle that having learners perform communicative tasks which help them develop knowledge and skill in the second language in accordance with the way their own language learning mechanisms work. Tasks function as devices for creating the conditions required for language acquisition. According to one body of theory, (e.g. Ellis 2003, Prabhu 1999) learners need opportunities to engage in meaning negotiation in order to obtain the kind of input that works for acquisition and to experience occasions where they are pushed to use the second language more precisely and appropriately. Generally speaking, students as task performers in this approach, should be quite familiar with communicative strategies, interpersonal relationships, and interaction principles.

Perhaps one of the earliest proposals of task-based teaching is the one associated with humanistic language teaching. Humanistic principles of education emphasize the achievements of students' by acknowledging the importance of the affective dimension in learning as well as the cognitive one. Humanistic principles encourage learners to recognize their feelings and let them use the target language by caring for and sharing with others. Long (1989) proposed four general points regarding the effectiveness of different task types:

- *Two-way tasks* produce more negotiation of meaning than one-way tasks, since the former make the exchange of meaning obligatory, whereas the latter do not.
- *Planned tasks*, where learners prepare their speech or think about what they will say beforehand, encourage more negotiation than unplanned tasks.

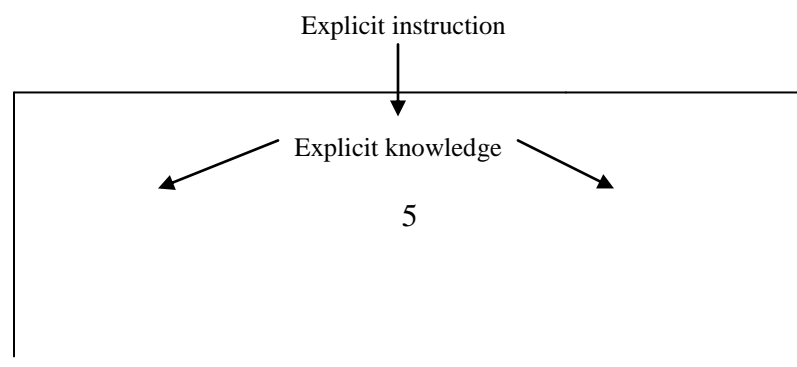
- *Closed tasks*, where there is a definite solution or ending, produce more negotiation than open tasks, where there is no clear resolution.
- *Convergent tasks*, where the participants must agree on a solution, promote more negotiation than divergent tasks, where different views are permitted.

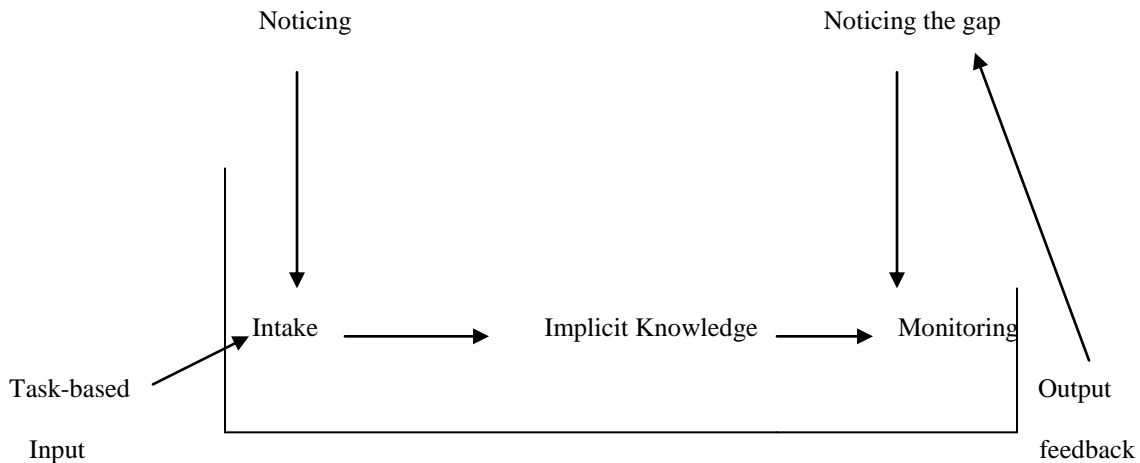
## 2. Literature Review

Ellis (2003) believed that “today teachers and researchers recognized that unless learners are given the opportunity to experience meaning-focused language use practices which they may face in target language use contexts, they may not develop the interlanguage they need to communicate”. He differentiated tasks from exercises in the way that tasks have nonlinguistic outcomes while exercises have linguistic ones. In contrast, an exercise has an explicit linguistic outcome.

Stern (1992) offered a comprehensive classification of task-based communicative activities that includes field experiences, classroom management activities, inviting guest speakers, talking on topics related to students’ private life and on substantive topics drawn from other subjects on the school curriculum. These were arranged in descending order with those closest to communicative reality at the top and those farthest removed at the bottom.

In an article, Schmitt (2004) pointed to TBLT’s correspondence to his theory of *implicit learning*. He defined implicit learning as the acquisition of knowledge about the underlying structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process which takes place naturally, simply and without conscious operations. From this definition, it is obvious that implicit learning has two principal aspects; it takes place unconsciously and it is automatic.





He proposed this model in order to elaborate on how explicit knowledge changes into implicit knowledge. There are also a number of different accounts of how a skill-automatization takes place in TBLT. Here, the researcher focused on the accounts provided by McLaughlin (1996). According to him,

Automatic processing involves the activation of certain nodes in memory each time the appropriate inputs are present. This activation is a learned response that has been built up through consistent mapping of the same input to the same pattern of activation over many trials (p.123).

*Automatic* processing contrasts with *controlled* processing in which activation of nodes involves intentional control. A key difference between automatic and controlled processing is that the former occurs rapidly and in parallel form the latter occurs more slowly and functions serially. Both types of processes have their advantages and disadvantages. Automatic processes are easy and rapid. They take up little processing capacity and thus make it possible for learners to focus attention on higher-order skills. However, automatic processes can be suppressed or changed only with difficulty. In contrast, controlled processes are easily established and are flexible but they are very demanding on the part of processing capacity.

### 3. Discussion

For being faithful to an objective framework for focusing on these two methods, the researchers applied Rogers & Richard's (1986) trichotomous plan of method classification

according to which three key aspects should be considered for each method investigation; *approach* (theory of the nature of language and theory of the nature of language learning), *method* (student's role, teacher's role, the role of instructional materials, and assessment facets), and *procedure* (classroom techniques and practices).

### **3.1 Approach**

Approach as a technical term was first proposed by Anthony in his article "approach, method and technique" first published in 1965. He was concerned with two problems; (1) how to relate language teaching theory and practice to each other, (2) how to describe this relationship. An approach to language teaching and learning represents an outline conception of the way in which method and technique should proceed, a seedbed from which a method springs, but not yet a strategy specifying details of classroom practice. Of course there must be a logical fit between approach and method as an overall plan and technique as approach's actualization in a pedagogical context. In the following part TPR and TBLT are compared in the level of approach from two aspects to see their similarities and trivial differences.

According to Rogers & Richards (1986), at least two different theoretical views of language and the nature of language proficiency explicitly or implicitly inform current approaches or methods in language teaching. The first and the most traditional, is the structural view, the view that language is a system of structurally related elements for the coding of meaning. The target of language learning is seen to be the mastery of elements of this system, which are generally defined in terms of phonological units, grammatical units, grammatical operations, and lexical units. The second view of language is the functional view, the view that language is a vehicle for the expression of functional meanings. This outlook emphasizes the semantic and the communicative dimension rather than merely the grammatical characteristics of language, and leads to a

specification and organization of language teaching content by categories of meaning and function rather than by elements of structure and grammar.

TBLT obviously has a functional view. By its very nature, appropriate context-dependent functioning is at the core of its underlying theory. The need to negotiate meaning necessitates learner to function properly through the authentic language. TPR too, by focusing on the coordination of speech and action can be considered as a functional model of language learning according to Palmer (1959). He considered TPR as a situationally based teaching strategy in which a chain of action verbs served as the basis for introducing and practicing new language items. He examined an action-based teaching strategy in his book *English Through Actions* and claimed that “no method of teaching foreign speech is likely to be so economical and successful as TPR in teaching a target language in which pupils get familiar with the manifestations of their speech.”

Learning theories associated with a method at the level of approach may emphasize one or both of these two dimensions,

*Process-oriented*\_ theories which are constructed on the foundation of learning processes, such as habit formation, induction, inferencing, hypothesis-testing, and generalization.

*Condition-oriented*\_ theories which emphasize the nature of human and physical contexts in which language learning takes place.

Rogers & Richards (1986) in his book *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* mentioned,

Asher’s TPR is a method that is derived primarily from learning theory rather than the theory of the nature of language. Asher’s learning theory addresses both the process and condition aspects of learning. It is based on the belief that child language learning is based on motor activity (p. 89).

On the other hand, TBLT is a teaching approach based on the use of communicative and interactive tasks as the central units for the planning and delivery of instruction. Such tasks are said to provide an effective basis for language learning since they

- Involve meaningful communication, interaction and negotiation,



- Enable learners to acquire grammar as a result of engaging in authentic language use and finally,
- Enable learners to acquire language in stress-free contexts.

Various approaches to TBLT reflect the issues which located prominently in current discussions of language pedagogy\_ the role of meaning-based activities, the need for more learner-centered curricula, the importance of affective factors, the contribution of learner training, and the need for some focus-on-form. Task-based pedagogy provides a way of addressing these various concerns and thanks to this it attracts scholars' attentions increasingly.

Finally, it worth noting that Franke (1984) referred to common focuses of TPR and TBLT as follows;

- Inductive approach to grammar learning.
- Presenting new teaching items in context.
- Use of gestures, physical demonstrations, and actions.
- Focus on everyday vocabulary.
- Coordination of speech and action.
- Use of language actively in class.

### **3.2. Method**

#### **3.2.1 Students' role**

In TPR teacher and students take on roles similar to that of the parent and child respectively. Students must respond physically to the words of the teacher. The activity may be a simple game or may involve more complex grammar and more detailed scenarios. In better words, learners are listeners and performers in this method. They are supposed to respond to novel combinations of previously taught items. They are encouraged to speak when enough linguistic knowledge is internalized. Learners themselves are responsible for their own learning; teacher only exposes them to language. They monitor and evaluate their progress and are to develop their speaking abilities in their own natural paces. After 10-12 sessions, as students begin to speak, they issue

commands to one another as well as to the teacher. Asher (1974) believes because of its participatory approach, TPR may also be a useful alternative teaching strategy for students with *dyslexia* or related learning disabilities, who typically experience difficulty learning foreign languages with traditional classroom instruction.

To the researcher's personal opinion, TPR is most useful for beginners, though it can be used at higher levels where preparation becomes an issue for the teacher. It can be a challenge for shy students. Of course, as a TPR class progresses, group activities and descriptions can be used to continue the basic concepts of TPR into full communication situations. Thanks to nature of TPR which places an unnaturally heavy emphasis on the use of the *imperative mood*\_ that is, commands such as "sit down" and "stand up"\_ learners may find a limited language proficiency and may lead to a appear rude when attempting to use his new language.

### **3.2.2 Teacher's role**

Teacher's role in TPR looks to the way parents help children learn their native language. Communication between parents and their children combines both verbal and physical aspects. The child responds physically to the speech of their parent. The responses of the child are in turn positively reinforced by the speech of the parent. For many months the child absorbs the language without being able to speak. It is during this period that the internalization and code breaking occurs. After this stage the child is able to reproduce the language spontaneously. With TPR the language teacher tries to mimic approximately the same process in class. In TBLT teachers are most of all task designers. They should analyze learners' needs and preferences through an exact process of needs analysis and based on the derived information, design various types of tasks (divergent, convergent, and jigsaw) for their learners. They should facilitate meaning negotiation in class by letting learners select their desired topics. According to Ellis (2003),

...teachers in TBLT are coordinators. They help students express themselves through task performing and try to control the class in an on-going process of two-way flow of information (p. 43).

Teachers of both TPR and TBLT should be able to establish intimate relationships with their students (mother-like relations if not exaggerated). They must be patient of learners' flaws and let them communicate in a stress-free context of meaning negotiation. They should respect students' personal voices to show their eagerness for their language development. Although TPR and TBLT teachers should avoid meticulous class controlling, they should be aware of the activities supposed to be conducted in classroom beforehand and prepare themselves linguistically, mentally and even physically for their conduction.

### **3.2.3. Instructional materials and syllabuses**

Teacher's voice and action are central in this method whose appropriacy for beginners is emphasized by Asher (1978). Students are not asked to read any predetermined texts outside the class. The present researcher could not find any specific texts and materials or recipe based on which commands should be presented to the students in the literature. It seems that the whole needed materials and texts can be embodied in series of commands or maximally a set of simplified communicative tasks. The roles reverse after a while; firstly students are just listeners and performers but later they would be commanders and finally interactive task performers.

There has been a growing interest in the idea of "task" as a unit for developing language curricula. This interest has been stimulated by Corder's (1967) early claim that learners have their own "*built-in-syllabus*" which is in the some ways more efficient than the instructor-generated syllabus. Thus, a syllabus that specifies the linguistic content and the order it is to be taught, may not accord with the learner's built-in syllabus. One way around this problem is to specify the content of syllabus in terms of tasks which indicate in broad terms what learners will communicate about and the procedures they will follow to do so. Tasks do attempt to simulate explicitly the

actual language that is to be used in real-life contexts. According to one body of theory (Ellis 2003 & Rogers 1998), learners need opportunities to engage in meaning negotiation in order to obtain the kind of input that works for language acquisition and to experience particular occasions when they are pushed to use the second language more precisely and appropriately.

The construction of a task-based syllabus requires the specification of tasks to be included in the syllabus. To achieve this, it is helpful to classify tasks in terms of their type, to determine their thematic content and then to sequence them using appropriate criteria for grading their levels of difficulty for the learner. This will suffice in the preparation of a task-based syllabus consisting entirely of linguistically unfocused tasks. However, an optional framework includes the specification language forms and functions incorporated into the design of the syllabus as focused tasks. The optimal syllabus is the one which consists of both focused and unfocused tasks.

Long and Crookes (1992) identified *synthetic syllabuses* most appropriate for task-based courses and noted,

Synthetic syllabuses not only present linguistic forms separately, but also attempt to elicit immediate target like mastery of those forms. All synthetic syllabuses are not just structural, but also functional. Studies of interlanguage development provide no more support for the idea that learners acquire one notion or function at a time than for the idea that they master one word or structure at a time (p. 49).

Generally, Ellis (2003) defined three types of syllabuses for task-based courses;

**Procedural Syllabuses**\_ The procedural syllabus is associated with the work in India from 1979-1984 of Prabhu and others on the Bangalore/Madras Communicational Teaching Project. Bangalore Project is teaching *through* communication; and therefore the very notion of communication is different from CLT. Prabhu (1987) denied the sufficiency of Krashen's comprehensible input, but he supported the idea that students need plenty of opportunities to develop their comprehension abilities before any production is demanded from them. He

recognized that acquisition of a linguistic structure is not an instant, one-step procedure, and claimed that language form is acquired subconsciously through “the operation of some internal system of abstract rules and principles when the learner’s attention is focused on meaning, i.e., task-completion, not language”. Prabhu (1987) mentioned,

An activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process, was regarded as a ‘task’ (p. 65).

**Process Syllabuses**\_ A second task-based approach to course design is the process syllabus (Breen & Candlin, 1980; Candlin & Murphy, 1987). The early rationale for process syllabuses was educational and philosophical, not primarily psycholinguistic, with curriculum design proposals for other subject areas constituting important influences. A social and problem-solving orientation, with explicit provision for the expression of individual learning styles and preferences, is favored over a view of teaching as the transmission of preselected and predigested knowledge. This outlook is reflected in Candlin’s (1980) in definition of “tasks”:

.... sets of differentiated, sequenceable, problem-posing activities involving learners and teachers in some joint selection from a range of varied cognitive and communicative procedures applied to existing and new knowledge in the collective exploration and pursuance of foreseen or emergent goals within a social milieu (p. 67).

The process syllabus is a plan for incorporating the negotiation process and, thereby, learning processes into syllabus design. Breen (1984) proposed a hierarchical model, with sets of options at four levels, final selection among which at each level is left for users to decide on. Course design consists of providing the resources and materials needed for (a) *making general decisions* about classroom language learning (which students need to learn what, how they prefer to learn it, when, with whom, and so on), (b) *alternative procedures* for making those decisions (the basis for an eventual working contract between teacher and learners), (c) *alternative activities*, such as teacher-led instruction, group work, and laboratory use, and (d) *alternative tasks*, that is, a bank of pedagogic tasks students may select from to realize the activities.

**Task-Based Language Teaching**—A third approach to course design which takes task as the unit of analysis is task-based language teaching (Crookes, 1986). Task-based syllabuses utilize such conceptions of tasks which require a *needs identification* to be conducted in terms of the real-world *target tasks* learners are preparing to undertake—buying a train ticket, renting an apartment, reading a technical manual, solving a math problem, reporting a chemistry experiment, taking lecture notes, and so forth. Valuable expertise in procedures for conducting such *needs analyses* was accumulated by English for special purposes (ESP) specialists in the 1970s and 1980s and can still be drawn upon, even though most early ESP program designers were working within a notional-functional framework. Swales (1990) offered examples and insightful discussions from the design of a university English for academic purposes program.

### 3.3 Procedure

In order to evaluate the actual activities and for comparing the degree of correspondence between the theoretical principles and their actual realizations in the class context, the researchers have observed two pre-elementary classes (one French and one English) which were supposed to be TPR courses of language development in addition to a task-based intensive speaking course to illumine their actual fidelity to their theoretical prescriptions. The TBLT class approximately obeyed most of necessities of TBLT; hence, it focused on the use of authentic language and students' meaningful tasks performances using the target language while TPR classes did not rigorously follow TPR theoretical essentialities. First, it seems necessary to have a glance at TPR and TBLT underlying principles as a reminder. The following lines present the principles of TPR.

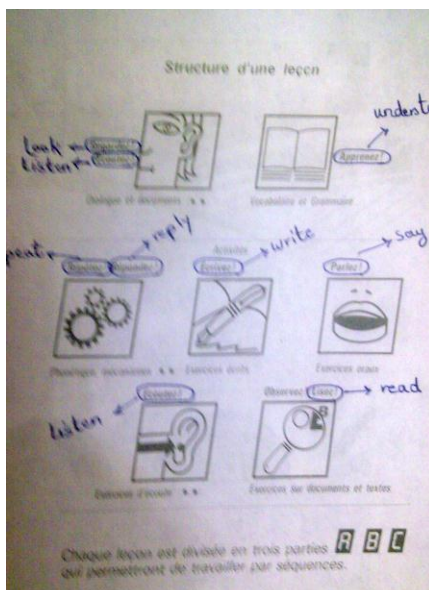
- Meaning in target language can often be conveyed through *actions*. Target language should be presented in *chunks* not just word by word.
- The student's *understanding of the target language* should be developed before speaking.

- The *imperatives* are powerful linguistic devices through which the teacher can direct student's behaviors.
- It is very important that students feel successful; *Feelings of success and low anxiety* facilitate learning.
- Correction should be carried out in *an obtrusive manner*.
- Language learning is more effective when it is *fun*.
- *Spoken language* should be emphasized over written language.
- Students will begin to speak *when they are ready*.

In Ellis's (2003) viewpoint, teacher's vital role in conducting a task-based course is determining the central features of tasks, based on the pedagogical context and accordingly developing a course design. Task features are:

- *Information exchange*; whether it is required or optional.
- *Type of information exchange*; whether it is one-way or two-way.
- *Communicative outcome*; whether it is closed or open.
- *Topic*; whether it is human-ethical or objective-spatial.
- *Discourse domain*; whether it is descriptive-expository or narrative-collaborative.
- *Cognitive complexity*; whether it is context-free or context-dependent.

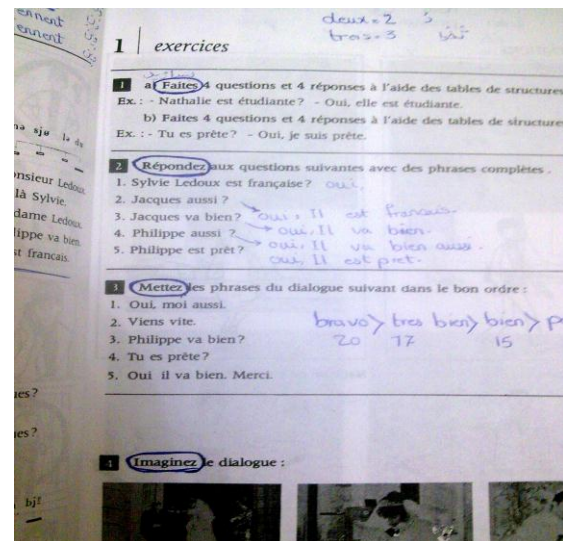
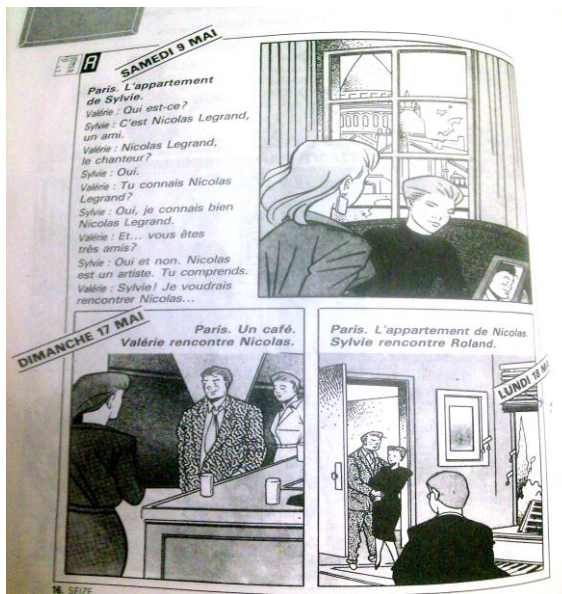
### A) TPR Class observations



**Example 1\_** French class used the book “*Le Francais sans Frontiers*” and started with a 5-minute reminder of teacher’s most frequent imperatives. The teacher in fact, articulated the verbs and illustrated them with his hands. The teacher was supposed to repeat this every session in order to remind students frequent imperatives in the classroom context. Next, there was a very simple dialogue which students were supposed to memorize for the next session followed by a

grammar part and a series of exercises. The text book was in black and white which may not raise students' enthusiasms to interact with the book. The observer has found some TPR principle violations during the class:

- The students were asked to do the grammatical exercises.
- No voluntarily participation of students.
- Correction was direct and obtrusive.
- No fun was felt in the class.
- No attention was paid to students' readiness for exercise solution.
- Imperatives were not the dominant linguistic device for running class activities.



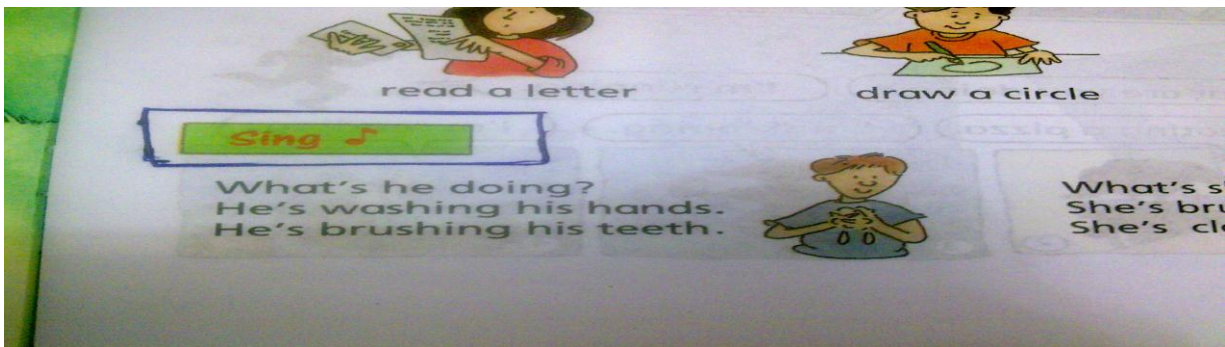
**Example 2\_** This class used “*Bravo Series*” which are specialized for pre-elementary courses

and TPR programs, in particular. These books are full of pictures as if they are painting books. The class started with a set of easy interrelated conversations which consistently narrate a story about fixed imaginary characters and followed by a series of





pictures showing someone engaged in an activity. The name of the activity was typed in boldface letters under the pictures. In fact, instead of coordination of speech and action there was coordination of speech and picture. After covering all pictures teacher asked students to come in front of the class and mime these specific activities. The class ended with no grammatical point and with a song (a nursery rhyme in better words). First, the teacher sang the song as a model and then asked the students to repeat verses one by one which was mostly accompanied with laughter.



To researcher's best knowledge, the English class was faithful to TPR principles. Of course, this was quite predictable from the beginning, why TPR is a comprehension-based method which was initially designed for teaching English as a second or foreign language (based on the structure and the use of imperatives in English) not other languages while other languages teachers can use this method appropriately on the basis of the structure and application of the imperatives in the language in question.

## **B) TBLT Class Observation**

For TBLT, the researcher observed an intensive speaking class. The students were preparing themselves for IELTS examination. They were seated in a U-shaped comfortable class and were categorized into four categories of three. Two subjects selected based on students interests from a list of topics presented in IELTS book; *one information-gap task* (deciding on what items to take

for a fishing trip) and *one reasoning-gap task* (discussing advantages and/or disadvantages of having a satellite receiver).

Students had 15 minutes to discuss these topics in their own groups during which the teacher was writing possible necessary words on the board with no speech for helping students keep their concentration. Then two groups as the *pros* and two groups as the *cons* of having a satellite receiver tried to persuade one another (a kind of intergroup activity) which lasted some 45-50 minutes. The losers were supposed to bring a box of sweet for the winners as the forfeit for the next session. Finally, the class ended with a 10-15 minute conclusion of the teacher.

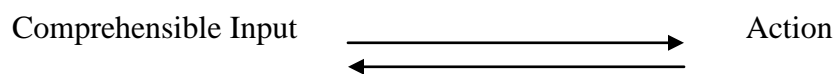
### 3. Conclusion

Krashen (1982), found TPR quite compatible with his famous “*input hypothesis*” but, he was criticized by Bley-Vroman (1986) in the way that, “comprehensible input is not the fundamental pedagogic key concept. Of course; it is necessary for language development but not sufficient.” As a result, Bley-Vroman (1986) proposed “*output hypothesis*” believing in the fact that, learners can improve their language competence (input/ intake) only when they are put in contexts of language use. He introduced the comprehensible output as “the fundamental pedagogic key concept”. Bley Vroman too, was objected by Long (1989), who proposed “*interaction hypothesis*”. To Long (1989), only through interaction the betterment of language proficiency may happen. So, it is possible to depict the evolutionary survey of “fundamental pedagogic key concept” as follows,

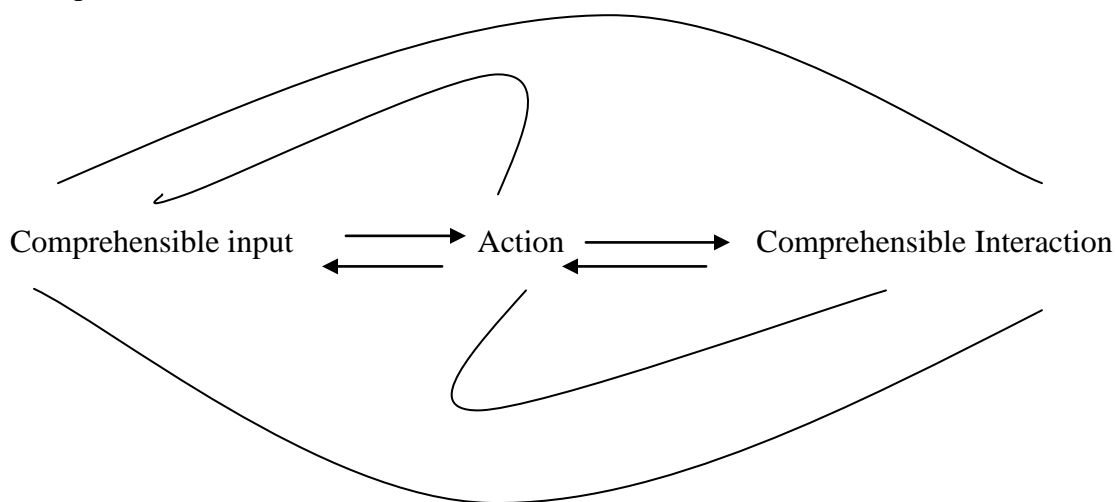


The remarkable difference between TPR and TBLT is the difference between focusing on “comprehensible input” in TPR and focusing on “comprehensible interaction” in TBLT. In fact,

the pedagogic figure of TPR has two vital elements which are related bidirectionally to one another;



The same figure for TBLT has three elements (one added element) which are connected to one another in parallel.



If one considers the pedagogic reformations in the realm of second/foreign language learning and teaching, in the last three decades (reliance on input then output and finally interaction), the claim that TBLT is a reformed or developed form of TPR does not seem so bizarre.

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