

PRIMARY TEACHER'S VIEWS ON INCORPORATING MOVEMENT IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The most recent findings of neuroscientific research suggest that learning is more efficient when there is a connection between the body, emotions and the mind. The paper investigates the role of physical movement in the English as a foreign language classroom in the higher level of primary school in Slovakia in schools with Hungarian language of instruction. The main aim is to find out EFL teachers' opinions on the incorporation of movement in EFL classes, especially when it comes to improving speaking skills. The main focus is on the application of drama techniques and the Total Physical Response method. The paper presents the findings of interviews conducted with EFL teachers and highlights the most significant views and practices revealed during these interviews.

KEYWORDS

physical movement, teaching EFL, improving speaking skills, drama techniques, TPR

INTRODUCTION

Satisfying learners' needs is one of the most significant challenges every foreign language teacher needs to face. Kinaesthetic learners or as Howard Gardner calls them "bodily-kinaesthetic" (Gardner, 2011) find it difficult to sit still during traditional lessons. However, it is not only them who request physical movement during lessons.

The benefits of incorporating physical movement in the foreign language classroom have been confirmed by a list of researchers and practitioners and there are several proven methods and techniques for integrating physical movement in the EFL classroom successfully. The main aim of this paper is to investigate the role of physical movement in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom in the higher level of primary school with Hungarian language of instruction in Slovakia and to examine the views, experiences and concrete practical solutions of in-service teachers. The findings of a qualitative study will be presented, based on interviews conducted with EFL teachers who work at primary schools in the southern Slovakian region.

Physical movement in teaching foreign languages

The most recent findings of neuroscientific research have confirmed the importance of movement and its influence on the development of cognitive skills and its beneficial impact on foreign language learning (e.g. Jensen, 2005a; Jensen, 2005b; van de Water et al., 2015; Jensen & McConchie, 2020).

A variety of learning styles require a variety of techniques. Visual, auditory, tactile and kinaesthetic learners demand several different activities which make their learning easier and quicker. Kinaesthetic learners need to get out of their chairs and desks and be involved

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physically, not only mentally. These learners are the ones who keep fidgeting during the lesson or chew a chewing gum because they lack movement and find it hard to sit still behind their desks during the course of the lesson. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (first published in the 1980s) also emphasizes the importance of varying approaches, methods and techniques in the classroom, because of the several types of different intelligences. Gardner writes about bodily-kinaesthetic learners, who need to use their bodies and be involved physically in their own learning process and are good at expressing ideas and solving problems through movement and practical tasks (Gardner, 2011).

However, research findings have confirmed that implementing movement in teaching is necessary not only because of satisfying the needs of kinaesthetic learners, it is beneficial for all learners in several different ways. Ferlazzo (2020), for example, points out that physical movement improves concentration, expands attention span and helps handling discipline problems. Movement helps learners stay focused, especially when being asked to sit for hours during the day. By standing up and carrying out physical movement, their memories are improved and their engagement in the lesson increases. Jensen argues that movement stimulates the brain, increases blood flow and oxygenation and it has a positive impact on the development of cognitive skills and learning capacity (Jensen, 2005a).

Movement can be incorporated in the EFL primary classroom in many ways. The most general and simple ways are, for example, when the teacher uses gestures in combination with some instructions. Of course, these gestures must be discussed with the learners in advance. Learners can also be asked to react to certain instructions or questions physically, for instance by pointing their thumb upwards when indicating 'true' and pointing down when indicating 'false'. They can also be asked to stand up when a statement is true and sit down when it is false. Activities can also have a 'movement' part, for example when the learner has to go from the front to the back of the classroom to collect some flashcards or the learner has to distribute word cards to different corners of the room. Learners can also be asked to move around the classroom for several different purposes, for example to find clues to solve a crime case or to collect information from a text and then dictating it to their classmates (more activities connected with physical movement can be found in Cameron, 2001 and Read, 2007).

TPR – the method based on movement

Total Physical Response, or TPR as it is often called, is one of the earliest methods in the history of foreign language teaching that aims at making learning foreign languages less stressful and more effective by combining physical movement with repetition. The creator of the method, James Asher was a psychologist and a professor who investigated the role of memory and the link between memory and physical movement. He claimed that when verbal repetition was connected with physical movement, then memorized language items could be traced and recalled more easily (Richards & Rogers, 2014: 277). Asher's contribution to the incorporation of movement in foreign language teaching is really significant and was a new phenomenon in the field of language teaching. He argues that by combining verbal production with movement a strong neural link is created, which eventually results in "kinaesthetic learning" (Asher quoted in: Lennon, 2021: 40). Asher even claims that TPR activates both hemispheres of the brain (Asher quoted in: Lennon, 2021: 40), which results in more efficient learning.

The practical usage of TPR is connected with giving instructions and learners following those instructions by responding with physical movement. These are not specifically drills or simple repetitions, but directives followed by the action responses of learners. There are various forms of TPR. Instructional TPR usually involves the teacher giving instructions such as 'draw' or 'circle' and combining these with concrete movement. By this, learners know

what tasks they are required to do and without native language translations or further explanations can carry out the task or can follow the teacher's instruction. Linguistic TPR is much more connected with meaning and explaining new or already well-known words with movements. Sometimes one word is not connected with one single movement, but is broken down into syllables and each syllable is combined with a different movement or gesture. This makes it easier for learners to remember that specific word or even improve their pronunciation, they learn the right pronunciation of the given word.

The implementation of TPR in primary schools has a wide range of advantages. Perhaps, one of the most significant benefits of TPR is that this method specifically satisfies the needs of kinaesthetic learners who need physical movement and plenty of space when learning something new. Another great advantage of this method is that it emphasizes spoken language over written language, which gives a feeling of success to learners by making them believe that they understand the commands of the teacher and can respond to spoken communication immediately. The application of this method also reduces stress and learner anxiety (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Cameron, 2001), which leads to a more relaxed learning environment and attentive learners.

Drama techniques in teaching EFL

Using drama in teaching foreign languages is not a new phenomenon. Educational drama has the aim of making the learning process more successful by engaging learners not only cognitively but also physically and emotionally. Maley and Duff explain that by using drama techniques in the EFL classroom, learners' imagination is activated and their personality is involved in the learning process (Maley & Duff, 1982). Using drama techniques in foreign language teaching does not necessarily mean rehearsing a play or getting ready for performance. Instead, it rather refers to the usage of certain techniques, for example miming, improvisation or frozen image with the aim of teaching language. Drama considers language usage as a practical activity and highlights the practical, real-life nature of verbal interaction, which requires the acquisition of many different elements including intonation, recognizing different emotional contexts, interpreting body language and noticing and considering the factors that influence language production and understanding (for example being in a hurry, changing moods, different emotions or irony). It is very common that what is being said is very different from what is being meant and the uttered sentences have a different meaning from the signs of body language, for example when encountered with rolling eyes, folded arms, frowning or angry glance. Understanding these signs and interpreting verbal communication flexibly and effectively cannot be acquired by memorizing long word lists or grammar rules or by drilling sentence patterns or expressions.

The most frequently used drama techniques in the EFL classroom include miming, mingling, mirroring, teacher narrative, thought bubbles, frozen image, improvisation, sculpting and role-play. When a teacher uses these techniques, it is not simply about encouraging or letting learners move physically during lessons, but it is also about different classroom interactions, learners learn in groups or pairs in various imaginary settings. Drama helps textbook language come alive, since learners use the language in various situations and context in a safe environment. Jessica Swale's research findings have confirmed that drama techniques in the classroom help learners overcome their inhibitions and build connections (Swale, 2009).

The incorporation of drama techniques into foreign language teaching compels with the latest findings of research about the impact of drama on empathy and emotional intelligence (as confirmed by van de Water et al., 2015) and reflects the most significant educational priorities and principles of twenty-first century teaching.

EFL teachers and physical movement: A study

In order to find out EFL teachers' attitude to and experience with physical movement and their connection with TPR and drama techniques, semi-structured interviews were conducted in August 2024 with four respondents, EFL teachers in the higher level of primary school in Slovakia.

Three main research questions were elaborated before the interviews:

RQ1: What is EFL teachers' attitude to incorporating movement during EFL classes (with special attention to the application and suitability of TPR and DT)?

RQ2: Did EFL teachers take part in any kind of training during their higher education teacher training?

RQ3: Do EFL teachers implement TPR and DT during their teaching practice?

A questionnaire was created as a guidance for the interviews, however, respondents could add further clarifications and comments.

The questionnaire started with collecting general information about the respondents (age, gender, number of years of teaching practice, name of institution where s/he teaches, number of English lessons taught during the week, the second major of the respondent – if any). Following this general part, the interview questions were divided into three categories:

Part A: questions connected with attitude (contained seven questions, specific questions about physical movement in general, TPR, drama techniques, with special attention to which skills, in their opinion can be improved by TPR and drama),

Part B: questions connected with experience and training (contained seven questions, whether the respondents had previous experience or training on how to use TPR and drama techniques in teaching EFL, either during their university training or following university, questions on whether they are willing to participate in such training courses or workshops),

Part C: questions connected with practice (contained seven questions on how the respondents incorporate physical movement during their teaching, seating arrangement in their classes, usage of TPR and drama techniques, experiences with kinaesthetic learners).

Description of respondents

The four interview participants have been selected based on their location. All four of them are EFL teachers at higher primary level of primary schools with Hungarian language of instruction, three work in Komárno, one in a nearby village Marcelová. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, who even signed a paper of ethical form.

The four respondents teach in three schools (two of them teach in the same primary school), Základná škola s VJM na Ul. Práce, Základná škola s VJM na Ul. Eötvösa and Základná škola s VJM Marcelová, and all of them are females in their 30s (38, 35, 39, 38 years of age). Three of them have their other major from another language (Slovak, Hungarian and Hungarian) and one in history. All four teachers have several years of teaching practice and experience (12, 6, 16, 17 years) and they have been working since their graduation from university with smaller interruptions (since all of them are females, they have a few missed years when they were on maternity leave). Three teachers teach a high number of EFL lessons a week: 20, 16 and 21, and one teacher teaches only 6 EFL lessons a week (simply because her other major, history, is taught by only two teachers in the school while there are quite a few EFL teachers).

RESULTS

Questions connected with attitude

The first part of the interview focused on the attitude of the respondents. It contained seven questions. All four teachers answered all the seven questions.

The first question dealt with the importance of physical movement in learning: “Is physical movement important during learning EFL? In what forms should it be present during the process of learning?” Physical movement has been generally marked as important by the respondents. The teachers use several types of activities to engage learners such as role play, group games or songs. Two of the teachers answered that they use physical activities during their lessons to warm up learners in the beginning of the English lessons or as alternating exercises, like Simon says, interview cards, drama games, to engage their learners. The teachers agreed on the idea that younger learners, those in lower primary classes, are more willing to participate in physical activities and they enjoy this form of teaching more than older learners (those in higher primary classes). Older learners, this is learners from grade 7 to grade 9, become easily frustrated and are less willing to participate in activities that are based on physical movement. Teachers need to consider the physical preferences and energy level of their older learners. Therefore, smaller activities like moving around the class to find something or interview cards are suggested for them. However, movement is considered to be a beneficial part of the EFL lessons and it can revitalize the attention and break the monotony of the lessons. It can also depend on needs and dynamics of the class or groups. Generally, the teachers think that physical activities during EFL classes are very important but it is easier to use them with younger learners rather than with older ones.

The second question was the following: “Is physical movement important during teaching EFL? In what forms should it be present during the process of teaching?” This set of questions focused on the importance of physical movement in teaching. All the interview participants have agreed that physical movement during teaching is important but it depends on class dynamics. Most of the younger groups require physical movement during the lessons, but the older students are quite lazy and tired, they do not want to move or change places. However, role play activities are appreciated by them. In summary, the respondents think that physical movement during teaching EFL is essential and also necessary.

The main focus of the third question was the method of TPR. “What is your opinion about the Total Physical Response (TPR) method? Is it suitable for teaching EFL at higher primary level?”. The responders were unfamiliar with TPR and could not really answer the question regarding its importance. TPR activities are seen as good tools to raise concentration especially when learners’ attention wanes, but in their opinion, it is not applicable for whole class activities. However, the teachers’ answers to this questions can be considered as guesses since they had a rather limited understanding of TPR. They may have heard about it, but they are unfamiliar with its usage and the basic principles of TPR. The respondents do not know many things about TPR and they do not really know how to implement it into their teaching. One of the teachers suggested a concrete activity she does with her learners: in the fifth grade while they learn the present simple, she asks questions, such as ‘Do you like banana? Do you like potato?’. The learners have to decide whether the answer is ‘yes’ or ‘no; then shout “Yes, I do.” Or “No, I don’t.” then they need to run to the previously agreed place. This teacher uses this activity many times, but she was not sure whether it has something to do with TPR or not. TPR is an unfamiliar method for the respondents, whether they have heard about it previously or not.

The fourth question dealt with drama techniques in teaching EFL. “What is your opinion about drama techniques in teaching EFL? Is educational drama suitable for teaching EFL at higher primary level?” While some teachers use drama techniques such as improvisation or role play regularly, others use them only occasionally because in their opinion older learners do not want to participate in these activities and they are too shy. Not all teachers feel trained enough to use drama techniques, but role play and improvisation are frequently used techniques among them. The respondents think that they need some specific dramatic skills or vein in order to confidently implement drama techniques and activities into their lessons. The potential of drama has been recognized by the teachers as effective ways of promoting skills like speaking and vocabulary. Drama techniques are accepted and acknowledged by the respondents and they use a few of them frequently during their teaching, but they also feel that they are underqualified and it would be necessary for them to participate in further training.

During the fifth question the participants had to rank the suitability of drama techniques for higher primary EFL learners. “Which drama techniques are suitable for higher primary EFL learners? Where they have to grade each drama technique like this: 1 – not suitable, 2 – a little bit suitable, 3 – suitable, 4 – very much suitable, 5 – I don’t know”. The drama techniques they had to grade were the following: improvisation, role-play, hot-seating, mirroring, miming, frozen image/tableaux, mingling. Improvisation was highly ranked (got scores 3 or 4 from everyone) but role-play was the ultimate favourite by the teachers (it got 4 from everyone). Miming came in the middle with moderate scores (like 2 and 3). Hot-seating, mirroring and mingling got mixed scores, where two participants gave a 3 and the other two were not familiar with the technique itself. Frozen image/tableaux landed on the last place, only one of the teachers was familiar with this drama technique, all the others heard about it for the first time. This evaluation suggests that role-play and improvisation are more favoured tools than the other mentioned ones, most likely because the others are either not considered suitable or they are not known at all. Therefore, a more practical training in drama techniques is recommended and needed.

The sixth and seventh question examined the respondents’ attitude on which skills are improved by TPR and drama techniques. Some examples were provided for the participants, like speaking, listening, writing, reading, vocabulary, grammar, something else or nothing. However, we were also open to hear the participants’ own answers. The respondents answered that TPR develops listening and vocabulary acquisition (speaking, instant communication and grammar were also mentioned, but since they were not completely familiar with the term, they rather just guessed). Drama techniques, on the other hand, they believe, enhance vocabulary as well as speaking and listening skills. Both TPR and drama techniques were considered appropriate ways of improving useful language skills, especially speaking.

Questions connected with experience and training

The second part of the interview focused on the experience and training of the participants. The questions concentrated on the courses and training that were available during the teachers’ university years, and whether they were interested in further training in drama techniques and TPR. There were seven questions in this part of the questionnaire.

During their university years most of the respondents had no formal training in drama techniques and TPR, only a brief theoretical introduction was provided by the universities with zero or very limited practical training. One respondent heard about drama during her first year at university, but there was no practical training provided for them. She added that she heard about drama techniques and uses some of them, but she would use much more if given proper training, because she likes to spice up the lessons with new experiences. The experience of the respondents with previous training on TPR was very similar to drama techniques.

The teachers did not even hear about TPR, neither did they get basic information about it nor had no practical training. A significant gap in teacher training was pointed out at this part of the interviews. Although most teachers recognize the importance of drama techniques and TPR, they cannot work with them simply because they are underqualified in this field of teaching. The participants agreed that they are unable to effectively implement TPR and drama techniques in their classroom, so they only use a few well-known techniques and only with learners that seem open to it.

The following four questions were connected with teacher training courses and examined whether the respondents have participated in any or whether they are willing to participate in some in the future. All teachers have had some kind of teacher training during their active teaching years and they attend some courses every year. However, most of them take part in these courses only because they need to get credits for their professional portfolio or they are officially sent there by the school management. Most of these trainings last two or three months and they have to participate in them on a weekly basis (the trainings usually take around 50 hours). All respondents have participated in trainings that were connected with their other major or dealt with some general class teacher activities. None of them have ever been to a training that was offered specifically for EFL teachers. All respondents would be interested in any course that deals with teaching EFL. Topics like creativity and how to use the textbooks creatively, how to incorporate physical movement and drama techniques into EFL teaching have been mentioned. One of the respondents suggested that there could be open lessons of drama techniques that practicing teachers could observe so that they could learn from these lessons first hand. It can be assumed that the respondents were significantly interested in further EFL teacher trainings that include drama techniques and physical movement. The respondents clearly expressed their desire for more practical training in EFL that would include drama, movement or creativity to help improve their teaching practice. All of the participants agreed that drama and physical movement would be better incorporated into their lessons if they got targeted and practical training in these topics.

Questions connected with practice

The last part of the interview focused on questions connected with teaching practice and how the respondents incorporate movement, drama techniques and TPR into their lessons, how they feel about movement in the classroom in general. This part contained seven questions.

The respondents mostly use a traditional seating arrangement (3 rows, 5 or 6 desks in a row, double desks, 2 kids sitting next to each other) in almost every class, since they do not have their own language classroom and they have to wander from one classroom to another. In each school there is a special language classroom with a non-traditional seating arrangement (for example long rows with computers, where learners sit next to each other, an interactive board), however, it is hard to get into these types of classrooms because all the language teachers would like to use them. Not all schools have interactive boards in the classrooms, one of the schools has only three in the whole building. The respondents change the traditional seating arrangement only when working on some activities that require pair or group work. One of the teachers does not move the learners during pairing or grouping, they just have to move closer to their peers. This teacher said she does not like loud noises in the classroom so they do not bother with rearranging the chairs or desks. All the respondents said that traditional seating arrangement works better for them for several reasons. Firstly, they do not have time to rearrange the classrooms during each lesson, secondly, the learners can be undisciplined during movements and the teachers must handle these discipline problems.

All the respondents incorporate some kind of movement into their lessons, some of them during each lesson and some of them depending on the activities. Movement during lessons is mostly used with younger learners (lower primary and fifth and sixth graders), because it is believed by the teachers that these learners enjoy these types of activities more than their older peers. With younger learners miming and pointing is used more often, especially with songs and vocabulary revision. Older learners are more passive when it comes to movement. Most of the activities that include movement also include the interactive board, where learners sometimes do not need to say a word, they just solve the exercise and go back to their places or the teacher puts some cards on the wall and they have to go and see them, read them. Of course, there were some other activities mentioned that include movement including speaking activities, for example warm up activities or revision activities where learners stand in a circle and pass a ball to each other or situation games, when learners work in groups or pairs. The teachers have agreed that older learners stay more passive during the EFL lessons than their younger peers, it is harder to work with them, because they do not want to move, they are tired or shy.

All of the respondents said that it is extremely disturbing and hard for them to work with learners who cannot sit still and are fidgeting all the time. Only one of the interviewed teachers said that she lets these learners move around the classroom until they do not disturb other learners, while another respondent said that she tries to incorporate more activities based on some kind of movement in the classrooms where there are these types of learners. The other two teachers said that they do not really know how to deal with these learners and they just try to handle discipline problems somehow during the classes. Many schools have an educational assistant teacher whose job is to help with learners who have some kind of a learning disability (such as ADHD, dysgraphia or dyslexia). However, many assistants are not properly trained and are not of a big help. Teachers are annoyed by learners that cannot sit still or are fidgeting all the time and some understand that these kids need some kind of a change, while others rather stay comfortable and discipline them.

Since none of the respondents were familiar with TPR, they were not using it during their teaching. The respondents mostly use the same few drama technique activities such as role play, improvisation or miming. It is definitely a positive aspect that all the respondents use these drama techniques on a daily basis, but not in all classes. Dialogues and text fragments are processed by role play activities and situations from the textbooks are performed during lessons. All the teachers have mentioned the textbook they are working with and that they try to use educational drama with some exercises that can be found in it.

The respondents were asked to mark seven concrete drama techniques based on how frequently they use them during their lessons. The two best known techniques, improvisation and role-play, together with miming got the most positive answers, all four respondents said that they use them. Hot-seating and mingling are in the middle, where two respondents said that they use this technique, and two do not. This is followed by frozen image/tableaux and mirroring, where only one of the teachers said that they have used these techniques during their career, indeed, the others have not been familiar with these techniques. The most frequently used techniques are role-play (4,3,3,3) and miming (4,2,2,3). The respondents have mentioned it earlier that they use these techniques frequently during their lessons and learners like these activities. This is followed by improvisation (2,2,2,3) and hot-seating (3,1,1,2). Although these techniques are enjoyed both by teachers and learners, they are used only rarely during EFL lessons. The last three techniques mirroring (2,2,1,1), mingling (1,2,2,1) and frozen image/tableaux (2,1,1,1) are rarely used by the respondents, only a few use them sometimes. Despite the fact that the above-mentioned drama techniques can be considered as the

most-known drama techniques, it is clear that most of the participants do not use them on a regular basis and there are a few techniques that are almost never used.

CONCLUSION

While drama techniques and the method of Total Physical Response are believed to have a positive effect on the foreign language teaching, the respondents in the interviews carried out in August 2024 are not familiar with the basic terms, techniques and methods.

Although literature and research findings confirm that physical movement and incorporating activities based on physical movement into EFL lessons are important, teachers think that it is not necessary to implement them during every EFL lesson. These teachers seem to make choices about whether to incorporate physical movement according to the willingness of their learners and their likeliness to participate in certain activities. While the respondents know about drama techniques and use some of these techniques during their lessons, they are not aware of the learning or teaching potential of these techniques. Surprisingly, the method of TPR is still an undiscovered area for these teachers. Most of them have heard about it, but are not familiar with its principles and techniques at all and because of this they do not use it during their lessons. However, in their opinion, speaking, vocabulary or grammar can be improved by these techniques and activities, which is a surprising claim considering the fact that they openly admitted that they are not using these techniques and method intentionally on a regular basis or with confidence.

The respondents would be interested in future trainings or courses that are based on drama techniques or TPR. The findings of the interviews have confirmed that the respondents are open to further teacher training, more specifically training courses dealing with EFL and not courses offering general knowledge about teaching or courses forced by either authorities or the school management. In addition, teacher training programmes should offer more courses or classes on drama techniques and TPR or further training on methods and techniques offering more practical help for teacher trainees.

We are planning to conduct more personal interviews and involve more respondents in the study to gain a more complex picture about teachers' attitude, experience and practice regarding the usage of drama techniques and TPR.

A very important finding of the interviews is that both pre-service teacher training programmes and teacher training courses offered for in-service teachers should be updated and adjusted according to the concrete needs of practicing teachers and social demands. This can lead to a more successful teaching and learning environment with more satisfied and confident teachers incorporating physical movement and exploiting the benefits of drama techniques and TPR.

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