Using Total Physical Response Scaffolding to Improve Oral Communication Skills and Encourage Autonomous Learning

By: Kate Heath

AIMS

Context
VIPKID provides supplementary English classes to Chinese students aged 4-13. The online lessons are one-on-one with interactive slides.

- There is a Cultural clash between the VIPKID methodology, which promotes interactional feedback and continuous assessment; and the traditional Chinese educational system, which is more teacher-centered and exam-oriented.

Problem
- When being corrected, the students simply repeated the key language after the instructor.
- There was a lack of autonomy and self-correction during oral production activities.

Solution
- The instructor used TPR-based scaffolding to model and elicit the correct oral responses.
- The instructor intended to enhance fluency, accuracy, and independent learning through this intervention.

Research Questions
- This project was meant to answer two questions:
  1. Does TPR scaffolding enhance students’ oral communication skills?
  2. Could TPR be used to scaffold learning and increase student autonomy in syntax, pronunciation, or lexis-related areas?

STUDY

Data
- The teacher chose four students who represented common issues in oral communication.
  - Tom and Maggie: Pronunciation at a sound and word level
  - Beckham: Applying correct grammatical structures to oral responses
  - Apple: Integrating new vocabulary terms into spoken answers

Initial Diagnostic Assessment
- A research diary revealed students’ issues and possible interventions.
- Other teachers’ comments showed a consensus regarding problem areas.

Action
- The teacher applied gesture-based scaffolding to lessons in order to elicit more autonomous responses from the students.
- The decision was supported by theories related to interactional feedback (Jayathilake 2009), TPR scaffolding (Asher 1966; Huang et al. 2014; Walqui 2006), and Continuous assessment (Vlachou 2015).

Time span
- The study included 5 sessions of 25 minutes each that were completed during October to December of 2016.

RESULTS

Trends from the Qualitative and Quantitative Data
- All students showed improvement in their oral communication skills (fluency and/or accuracy) over the course of five sessions.
- Some scores (scaffolding and fluency) fluctuated when new material was introduced.
- Every student relied less on scaffolding measures over time; all students but one became completely independent from scaffolding measures during the study.

Conclusions
- All of the students’ speech reflected improved fluency, accuracy, and autonomy due to the application of TPR scaffolding.
- The four students went through the same basic steps:
  1. They repeated information after the teacher and noticed the gestures.
  2. The students learned how to apply the gestures to their oral responses.
  3. The learners became independent in their learning and no longer relied on the gestures when producing speech.

- Altogether, TPR scaffolding enhanced students’ pronunciation, syntax, and lexis while encouraging autonomous learning.

Recommendations and Future Action
- TPR Scaffolding should be for at least 5 sessions as to note students’ improvement and uptake of both familiar and new material.
- These measures should be used with children of similar ages and language levels; young learners particularly appreciated the gestures.
- This methodology is widely applicable and will be used to address different problem areas, such as reading, writing, and listening skills.
- TPR scaffolding can help students to stay focused and engaged, too.

Continuous Assessment
- Teachers’ Log: The teacher noted progress and transcribed salient parts of the lessons.
- Oral Assessment Criteria: The teacher noted fluency, accuracy, and scaffolding uptake.

Fluency
- 5 Task done very well. Little hesitation. Student speaks independently.
- 4 Task completed quite well. Some hesitation. Student speaks independently.
- 3 Task done adequately. Quite a few pauses, but communication does not break down. Student speaks using some notes.
- 2 Tasks not done adequately. A lot of hesitation. Student largely reads the response.
- 1 Response completely inadequate. Student completely reads the response.

Accuracy
- 5 Correct use of most structures studied so far. Clear pronunciation.
- 4 Use of different structures studied so far with only a few serious mistakes. Pronunciation quite clear.
- 3 Use of some of the structures studied. Some mistakes, but reasonable understanding possible. Pronunciation satisfactory.
- 2 Structure and lexis very limited with a lot of mistakes. Poor pronunciation.
- 1 Almost incomprehensible speech.

Scaffolding Uptake
- 5 Completely independent response.
- 4 Student needs little to no TPR scaffolding to complete the response.
- 3 Student needs some TPR scaffolding to complete the response.

Oral Assessment Scores

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Session 1</th>
<th>Session 2</th>
<th>Session 3</th>
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<tr>
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All scores are out of 15 possible points

REFERENCES


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