



THE COMPREHENSION APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The comprehension approach is focus on helping make meaning clear and supporting learners gain confidence so that they are willing to produce language. Teachers use classroom objects, observable actions, and chunks of language in novel combinations. An advantage of the CA is the fact that when the learner eventually understands the meaning and the correct application of the words, the language will sound more effortless when he or she speaks it in contrast to other forms of language learning, which may result in more stilted efforts. On the contrary, some people who are not very confident might decide to wait until they feel that they have totally grasped the concepts of the language, including the correct pronunciation, before attempting to speak that language.

Key words: Comprehension approach, advantages, disadvantages.

INTRODUCTION

The comprehension approach is an umbrella term which refers to several methodologies of language learning that emphasise understanding of language rather than speaking. This is in contrast to the better-known communicative approach, under which learning is thought to emerge through language production, i.e. a focus on speech and writing. The comprehension approach is most strongly associated with the linguists *Harris Winitz, Stephen Krashen, Tracy D. Terrell and James J. Asher*. The comprehension-based methodology mostly commonly found in classrooms is Asher's Total Physical Response approach; Krashen and Terrell's Natural Approach has not been widely applied. English as a Second Language Podcast is a more recent application of the comprehension approach grounded in Krashen's theories.

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The comprehension approach is based on theories of linguistics, specifically Krashen's theories of second language acquisition, and is also inspired by research on second language acquisition in children, particularly the silent period phenomenon in which many young learners initially tend towards minimal speaking. In contrast, the communicative approach is largely a product of research in language education.

Learning through understanding

Comprehension approach refers to a method of learning a new language through the process of understanding the meaning of words and expressions in the language as opposed to any other form of language learning. Other methods that may be used as part of the progression of language learning include the process of learning the letters, symbols and other representations of the language first before actually understanding the meaning of the words. The difference between the comprehension approach and the other more scientific approach to learning a new language lies in the fact that the comprehension approach is simply another dimension toward learning a new language. The comprehension approach usually involves a silent period when the learner tries to assimilate the various meanings of the words that make up the target language. How long the silent period lasts depends on the skills of the learner in terms of comprehension ability and general cognitive skills, as someone who is a quick study may be able to quickly grasp the basic concepts of a new language faster than others. During the silent period, the new language learner will try as much as possible to understand what the words mean and how to pronounce them. The disadvantage of this type of approach is that some people who are not very confident might decide to wait until they feel that they have totally grasped the concepts of the language, including the correct pronunciation, before attempting to speak that language. This may be due to a reluctance to mispronounce the words or to misapply the language while attempting to speak it.

Advantages

An advantage of the comprehension approach of language learning is the fact that when the learner eventually understands the meaning and the correct application of the words, the language will sound more effortless when he or she speaks it in contrast to other forms of language learning, which may result in more stilted efforts. Since the comprehension approach requires a deliberate effort to understand the language first, it often leads to situations where the language learner might understand the general gist of the language, but lack the ability to speak it. This phenomenon may be attributed to the fact that the brain is a complex entity that allows for the resources to compartmentalize different cognitive skills, as is clearly evident in the ability to learn the meaning of a language first before speaking it.



Winitz founded the *International Linguistics Corporation* in 1976 to supply comprehension-based materials known as *The Learnables*; several positive articles have been published testing these picturebooks with their accompanying audio recordings, mostly with Winitz as co-author.

Disadvantages

Some of the potential weaknesses inherent in TPR approach.

Firstly, from a purely practical point of view, it is highly unlikely that even the most skilled and inventive teacher could sustain a lesson stage involving commands and physical responses for more than a few minutes before the activity became repetitious for the learners, although the use of situational role-play could provide a range of contexts for practising a wider range of lexis. Secondly, it is fairly difficult to give instructions without using imperatives, so the language input is basically restricted to this single form. Thirdly, it is quite difficult to see how this approach could extend beyond beginner level. Fourthly, the relevance of some of the language used in TPR activities to real-world learner needs is questionable. Finally, moving from the listening and responding stage to oral production might be workable in a small group of learners but it would appear to be problematic when applied to a class of 30 students, for example.

CONCLUSION

In defence of the approach, however, it should be emphasized that it was never intended by its early proponents that it should extend beyond beginner level. (In theory it might be possible to develop it by making the instructions lexically more complex (for example, "Pick up the toothpaste and unscrew the cap"), but this does seem to be stretching the point somewhat). In addition, a course designed around TPR principles would not be expected to follow a TPR syllabus exclusively, and Asher himself suggested that TPR should be used in association with other methods and techniques. In terms of the theoretical basis of the approach, the idea of listening preceding production and learners only being required to speak when they are ready to do so closely resembles elements of Stephen Krashen's Natural Approach.

Short TPR activities, used judiciously and integrated with other activities can be both highly motivating and linguistically purposeful. Careful choice of useful and communicative language at beginner level can make TPR activities entirely valid. Many learners respond well to kinesthetic activities and they can genuinely serve as a memory aid. A lot of classroom warmers and games are based, consciously or unconsciously, on TPR principles.

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As with other "fringe" methods, however, wholesale adoption of this approach, to the total exclusion of any other, would probably not be sustainable for very long.

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