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The Listening Skill of Autistic Students in Learning English through Total Physical Response

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Abstract

This study analyses how a teacher at SMPLB-CD YPAC (Foundation for Children with Disabilities), Banda Aceh, Indonesia, teaches English listening using the Total Physical Response (TPR) method to autistic students. In this method, a teacher instructed the students to act as modelled by the teacher. Students are considered to have good listening comprehension if they understood the teacher's commands and imitated the act. This research is qualitative to describe the application of the TPR method in teaching English listening skills to autistic students. The sample for this study was four autistic students at the school under study. The data were collected by observing and documenting the English listening teaching-learning process in the classroom using the TPR method. The data were then analysed, focusing on the classroom dialogues directly related to using the TPR method to teach listening comprehension to autistic students. The results showed that the TPR method is suitable to teach students with autism to learn and understand new words. This was because they were asked to imitate the words verbally and in action repeatedly. The students could memorize the new vocabulary because it involved motor activities, which created a fun atmosphere in the classroom. Students were active in doing the actions and have no pressure to learn. The TPR method also contains elements of games which is able to raise a positive mood in autistic students.

Keywords: Teaching listening, total physical response, autistic students, learning difficulties, EFL learners.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Listening constitutes a significant part of our communication and is mainly context-based; therefore, it requires special attention to improve communicative interactions (Gaw, 2002). Listening has the meaning of being able to catch sounds with the ears. Aware or not, if there is a sound, our hearing device will catch or hear the sounds. The process of hearing occurs without planning but comes by chance. The sounds that are present in the ear might attract attention, and maybe not. Listening is deemed more important than the other skills (Samuel, 2015) since it is used twice than speaking on a normal day and as much as five times more than reading and writing.

English is a compulsory subject in junior high schools in Indonesia, where the aim is to prepare the students to study English at a higher level of education. In teaching English, listening is one of the essential skills that have to be mastered by the students at all levels (Silviyanti, 2014; Suryanto, 2004). Without having good listening skills, students will find difficulties in integrating into a talk, discussion, or follow the commands from their teachers and peers. Therefore, an English teacher needs to know and apply the methods and strategies in their classrooms.

Several studies have been conducted on teaching English to students with autism. Among them is by Padmadewi and Artini (2017), and they found that the use of Individual Education Plan (IEP) together with visual media through co-teaching, differentiated instruction, and an additional ‘buddy program’ is found to be beneficial to help these students in learning EFL. Furthermore, Setiadi (2017) found that a good use of teacher talk, directly and indirectly, in the classroom by the English teacher could help students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the teaching-learning process. Meanwhile, Romadlon (2017) studied the use of speech therapy to help autistic students in learning English because speech therapy often requires graded language teaching.

Hence, no previous studies about the English teaching process of autistic children in Indonesia have been carried out to specifically study their listening skills. Therefore, the researchers want to focus on observing the ability to listen to English learning by autistic children. The reason is that children with autism have some trouble listening to and interacting with others. Thus, the researchers think that this study is essential to find an appropriate method and strategy to help these students improve their English listening skills. Autistic children are usually hyperactive or hypoactive (Kuliński & Nowicka, 2020), no directional movement, less able to sit quietly, lack eye contact, have uncontrolled movements, and get angry or cry for no reason.

To solve the problems mentioned above, the researchers suggest that English teachers use Total Physical Response (TPR) in teaching listening to autistic students. As a language teaching method founded by Asher (1965), TPR is built around coordinating speech and action. TPR uses lots of physical activities to support students memorize new words and understand instructions ordered by the teacher (Nuraeni, 2019). TPR is also suitable to teach English to autistic students because the students are not only listening to English orders as their foreign language but also responding. By doing the actions, it will help the students to concentrate on the materials taught by their teacher. According to Asher (1966), the TPR method is in harmony with the natural order of language learning. It also allows learners to feel relax. Besides, TPR uses physical movements to respond to oral input and reduce student barriers. It allows students to respond to language learning without pressure (Yusuf et al., 2017).

Therefore, the researchers consider TPR to be a suitable method for teaching English listening to autistic students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Importance of Listening

Listening is a receptive skill where a listener needs to listen actively, has focused attention, and concentrates on the speaker's information to grasp the meaning behind the words being uttered (Bedwell, 2014; Nunan, 2003). Listening is not an easy task when it deals with listening to another language. However, as Brown (2006, p. 1) claimed that a teacher could make this listening process easier by "activating prior knowledge, helping students organize their learning by thinking about their purposes for listening". It can be done by creating exciting activities for the listening class to help students engage in the learning process.

2.1.1 Factors affecting the listening process

According to Yagang (1994), several factors affect the listening process. The first one is the message or content. As the speaker delivers, the message needs to be something familiar and exciting to the listener to make the listener listens actively to the speaker's information. Second is the listener himself/herself. As an active participant in a conversation, s/he has to be interested and has a background knowledge of the topic being discussed. A listener also should actively ask for clarification if s/he needs further explanation, or repetition if the message is not clear, and explanation for any points that s/he does not understand. This will facilitate the listener to understand the information given. The speaker also needs to speak clearly and at a reasonable rate to help the listener understand what s/he is talking about. The last factor is physical setting or visual support. It can be either of gesture, facial expression, and body language of the speaker, or visual aids such as video, pictures, diagrams to help the listener in interpreting the meaning.

2.1.2 Listening process

A teacher can create activities throughout the listening process in the classroom in three stages: before, during, and after the listening task. Before starting the listening activities, a teacher needs to involve students in a top-down activity. It means that the teacher needs to activate the schemata by engaging students in discussing the topic for that day. This way, the students will bring their background knowledge in the discussion of the topic, which will help them and their peers to understand the content of the topic before they listen to it in the while-listening activities. During doing the listening tasks, students can be given a wide variety of activities to improve their listening skills, such as responding to the teacher's command. The command can be in the form of doing an action, such as 'stand up!', choose the correct image or object, fill in a chart, answer to questions, take notes, solve a problem, repeat after the teacher, instruct their peers as instructed by the teacher or participate in a small conversation (Lund, 1990). At the end of the listening activity, the teacher, together with the

students, evaluates how far the students succeeded in accomplishing the listening tasks given. The teacher discusses the answers for the tasks as feedback for the students.

Van Duzer (1997, in Kusumarasyati, 2000) proposed things to bear in mind for the English teacher when conducting the listening activity for the students, such as the material had to be relevant for the students' level. The material should be authentic to reflect the real conversation. This means that the dialogues should have things like hesitations, rephrasing, and accents. It is also necessary for the teacher to encourage students to do top-down and bottom-up processing skills to engage in listening activities. Top-down means the students use their prior knowledge to understand the listening material, and the teacher can encourage the students to do this by raising questions on the topic and ask students to predict the material they will listen to. At the same time, bottom-up means understanding the material from its sound and words. The activities in the listening class are given to teach students to improve their skills in listening. Therefore, the task activities in the three stages of the listening process should help students to focus on what should be listened to, to assess how accurate they are in listening, and to apply their skills in listening to the real practice outside the classroom.

2.2 Total Physical Response (TPR)

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a method to teach vocabulary to the students by using movement. This method brings an enjoyable atmosphere for the students when studying a foreign language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Some principles in the teaching-learning process using this method are the students' vocabulary size of the language they learned should be developed before they are ready to engage in a short conversation in the language (Asher, 1988). By using action, students can understand the meaning of a word better than merely to memorize it. Using imperative words such as 'sit down!', a teacher can direct students' classroom behaviours.

2.2.1 The method of TPR

This method helps students to observe their peers' movements while doing the movements themselves. This method also builds the feeling of success when the students can do the right order and lowering the feeling of anxiety since they are not encouraged to speak at this stage and only encouraged to act based on the order given by the teacher. Students are not pushed to memorize new words, and the teacher should correct the students' mistakes unobtrusively. A teacher needs to make sure that students understand the sentences or orders given by the teacher. Learning a language in a fun atmosphere where students need to move in a directed way is more effective than merely asking to sit still during the learning process. After 120 hours of treatment using this method, students are expected to be ready to have a short conversation with their classmates (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

2.2.2 The advantages of TPR

The TPR method offers several advantages to students as well as the teacher such as TPR creates an enjoyable atmosphere in the learning process, which in turn lifts the students' motivation to engage in the learning activities. Students will learn new

vocabulary easier since they practice the vocabulary, which helps them automatically memorize the new words. A study by [Windi \(2017\)](#) at SDLB Negeri 027701 Binjai, Indonesia, found that three primary students with autism increase their vocabulary after given treatment using the TPR method. This method was suitable for young learners or teenage learners who are kinesthetic learners and keen to learn in a fun and playful situation ([Putri, 2016](#)). TPR is best to be applied either in a small class or a large one. Doing physical action while practicing a new word will help students grab the meaning of the vocabulary and able to use it in communication when they are ready to engage in a conversation. [Asher \(1988\)](#) claimed that TPR encouraged an instant understanding of the target languages regardless of academic ability and built a stress-free classroom learning atmosphere. [Larsen-Freeman \(2000\)](#) argued that TPR was effectively applied in the initial phases of learning a second or foreign language.

2.2.3 *Techniques in the TPR method*

The use of commands in the main teaching techniques of TPR is crucial for the teacher because, in this method, students will do lots of movements. [Larsen-Freeman \(2000\)](#) said that the teacher modelled the command and took appropriate actions to clarify the meaning. Students carry out orders (action-based exercises) with the teacher, with friends, individually, and in groups. When they start talking, they express orders to the teacher and each other. Commands that are present are sequential, but as suggested by [Asher \(1988\)](#), there should be no exact repetition of the same sequence, and the teacher might vary the practice every time to avoid memorizing a fixed sequence of behaviours. The command should create a funny situation to make the learning process fun and not tense. The teacher must also plan the sequence of commands that are in progress to maintain the speed of the lesson.

The commands, as claimed by [Asher \(1968\)](#), are used to communicate all grammar features and hundreds of vocabulary words. They can be divided into several groups, as follows:

- Moving the whole body or parts of the body, such as asking students to ‘stand’, ‘walk’, ‘jump’, ‘run’, ‘sit’, etc.
- Moving things, such as giving students directions to ‘write an A on the blackboard’, ‘touch your nose’, etc.
- Moving abstractions or pictures such as placing the picture of a cat above the word cat on the book, placing the picture of the pilot on the picture of an airplane, giving the happy birthday card to a friend, etc.
- Action sequences are based on everyday activities, such as eating lunch, washing dishes, etc. The command for each activity is broken up into several sequences and commands, for example, take your sandwich using both hands, eat the sandwich, stop, grab your drink bottle, drink the water from the bottle, and so on.

This method is continually done up to 120 hours of study time. So, if English is taught six hours per week, it will take up to 20 weeks or five months to do the TPR method in the classroom. By this time, students are believed to have enough vocabulary to start some simple conversation based on daily routines. The conversation is in a role-playing dialogue. The dialogue centres on everyday situations, such as house chores, greetings, farewells, telephone calls, birthdays, asking directions, transportation, ordering menus in a restaurant, and others ([Dobson, 2003](#); [Richards & Rodgers, 2007](#)).

2.2.4 The objectives of TPR

Total Physical Response uses imperative drills to teach a second or foreign language at the initial level. This method makes students enjoy their experience in learning foreign languages. As there are many movements, it will help diminish the stress on the part of the students which commonly happens when a student learns a foreign language and thus encourage them to continue studying (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Mirici, 1999). Using the TPR method, the students will learn beyond the initial proficiency level in a fun classroom atmosphere.

2.2.5 Teachers' role in TPR

A teacher plays a significant role in teaching using the TPR method. The teacher selects what to teach, how to model an act, and picks the supporting materials to use in the class (Shi, 2018). Therefore, teachers should prepare the lesson plan before they enter the classroom. They should have a comprehensive lesson plan, such as to write down the words or commands they are going to use and be ready for a fast-moving action from the students. It is to make sure the lesson runs well and as predicted.

A teacher has the responsibility to provide more opportunities for learning to students than merely teaching them verbally. It can be done by directing students to interact with their peers and asking them to give their peers commands as modelled by the teacher beforehand. The teacher also has to control the input of language received by students; s/he has to ensure that the students understand the basic rule of the language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

The teacher needs to make sure the speaking ability develops in the students according to the natural pace of the students themselves. Teachers have to avoid underestimating the difficulties involved in learning a foreign language, which will result in progress at a speed that is too fast and fails to provide a gradual transition from one teaching stage to another. During and after the learning process, the teacher needs to provide feedback for the students to help them learn from the mistakes they made. By learning from feedback, students will prepare themselves to start to speak.

2.2.6 Learners' role in TPR

Students in the TPR method have the primary role as listeners and players. They listen thoughtfully and respond physically to the instructions given by the teacher or their peers. The instructions given by the teacher are to be acted on individually or collectively. In this method, firstly, students will imitate any acts modelled by the teacher, this is followed by a student practice giving a command to his/her peer and the peer need to act based on the command given. This can be done in pairs or groups (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). In this method, students will be able to observe and assess their achievements. Students should have enough vocabulary and understanding of the basic rules of the language before they are ready to speak.

2.3 Teaching Students with Autism

'Autism' comes from the word 'auto,' which means 'alone' (Sunu, 2012, p. 7). This term is used because those who suffer from autism symptoms often look like

people who live alone. Autistic students face difficulties to involve in social interaction. They seem to live in their world and are detached from the social contacts around them. Autistic students have difficulties to concentrate, memorize words, understand a complex sentence, build communication, interact with others, show to have less confidence, and usually avoid making eye contact with the interlocutor (Sari, 2015). In 2015, the number of children with autism in Indonesia reached 150-200 thousand (Sari, 2015). In teaching a foreign language to these students, the teacher needs to have strategies, such as to use modelling, visual support for instructions, provide instructions in both languages, etc. (Benwell, n.d.). These are important to attract the students' attention and keep their motivation during the learning session.

3. METHODS

This study was a qualitative study of nature. It was conducted at the *Yayasan Pendidikan Anak Cacat* (or YPAC, translated as Disability Education Foundation), located in Santan village, Aceh Besar district, Aceh Province, Indonesia. The YPAC provides education for autistic children from the elementary, junior high, and high school levels. From these levels, there are 30 children currently studying at the school. Hence, the participants of this study were four autistic junior high school students in grade seven, comprising one female and three males, at the YPAC. They were the only students currently studying in this grade. This grade was further chosen due to the availability and consent to collect data from the teachers, parents of the children to be observed, and the children themselves. These autistic children are not open to newcomers (i.e., the researchers and other people), making it the researchers challenging to collect more data from other classes.

3.1 Data Collection

The data were collected in two meetings. The first meeting was to meet and greet them in order for the autistic students to know the researchers and accept them when they did the observation and documenting them in the next meeting. This meeting was essential to avoid uneasiness in having strangers in their classroom, watching them. By getting to know the researchers before the research took place, it would be easier for the researchers to collect data in the second meeting. The second meeting was held for 80 minutes, where the English teacher taught English listening skills to her autistic students using the TPR method. The researcher collected the data by observing, video-recording the teaching-learning process, and taking notes on any learning process using the TPR method. Table 1 shows the list of commands, adapted from Asher (1968) and Er (2013), instructed by the teacher to teach the students listening skills.

Table 1. Speech and action.

Speech	Action
Get up, please!	1. Students were standing up
Run, please!	2. Students were doing a short run
Stop, please!	3. Students stopped running
Jump, please!	4. Students were jumping
Turn around, please!	5. Students were turning around

Table 1 continued...

Sit down, please!	6. Students were sitting on their chair
Touch your nose, please!	7. Students were touching their nose
Touch your friend's ear, please!	8. Students were touching their friends' ear
Go to the door, please!	9. Students were walking towards the door
Go to the window, please!	10. Students were walking towards the window

3.2 Data Analysis

As explained earlier, the data from the seventh-grade teacher and children were collected by observing and documenting the way the English teacher taught English listening skills using the TPR method. The collected written data were classified to locate the data directly related to the subject matter. While for the recording data, the researchers watched it again several times, focusing on the use of the TPR method in the classroom and the interactions that took place between the teacher and her students. The next step was to write a draft of this study report. In doing this, related information from books, e-books, and journals related to the application of TPR in teaching English, especially listening skills, and any literature about autism, were added to strengthen the data.

4. RESULTS

The teaching-learning process began with daily greetings, followed the prime session of the lesson activity. The teacher explained the subject matter that she would teach the students for that day in Indonesian, the national language of Indonesia. It was followed by giving the instructions one by one, started with the word “get up!” she used her hand gesture while saying this. She asked the students to *bangun* or “get up” when she ordered the command. At first, the students did not seem to understand the teacher’s instructions fully. After the teacher repeated it several times and showed them what they should do, they began to do as instructed by the teacher. Then she asked if any students would like to stand in front of the class to perform the commands that she would instruct them to. Nevertheless, no one wanted to do so and chose to keep silent and have themselves busy with their own things. The teacher then asked the students to listen to her again and watch her because she would do some actions based on the instructions she read. The next thing was that the teacher asked the students, one by one, to start with the one who sat on the left front. The teacher asked the other students to pay attention to the teacher’s commands and to do the action that would be performed by the first student. The teacher then repeated the same instructions she read before, one by one, modelled the actions, and asked the student to follow her by doing the action. The student was then confident in following the teacher’s instruction and did all the actions without hesitation. Besides doing the actions one by one, the teacher also asked the students to do the actions together. This way, the teacher could determine who did not yet understand the instruction.

The teaching-learning process to the four autistic students received different responses. It was because each student has different personalities. Student 1 (St. 1) was the most active and enthusiastic in following the teacher’s instructions. The teacher asked the student to stand up when she said, *Get up!* This is as reflected in Excerpts 1 and 2.

Excerpt 1

- Teacher : Get up!
St. 1 : Get up! (repeating the teacher but no action)
Teacher : If I say, get up! then you need to stand up (using hand gesture)
Come on! Get up! (using hand gesture)
St. 1 : Get up! (repeating the command while getting up from his chair)
Teacher : Good, now sit down! (using hand gesture asking Student 1 to sit back on his chair)
St. 1 : Sit down (saying the command while doing the act to sit down on his chair)

Among the four students, Student 1 was the one who showed an increase in his receptive and expressive language skills during the intervention with the TPR method. At the beginning of the intervention, Student 1 indicated the ability to recognize the environment and understand other people's words. After given multiple interventions, his expressive language skill increased, such as when the teacher asked the students, while pointing to her nose, "what is this?" the students gave no response. The teacher continued, "this is a nose. If I asked you to touch your nose (touching her nose), you must point to your nose, touch your nose as I do, okay?" While the teacher was saying this, Student 1 imitated the action by touching his own nose, while the other students were only listening to the teacher. Student 1 was very cooperative to do as instructed by the teacher. He also seemed to have high confidence despite the confusion he had with the command at the beginning of the instructions. The teacher then continued to do the same thing to Student 3, who sat behind Student 1. Student 3 looked to be cooperative and active in listening to the teacher's explanations. He paid attention while the teacher taught Student 1. Therefore, when it was his turn to act as instructed by the teacher, he could do it in the second attempt.

Other students, even though not as fast as Student 1 in following the teacher's action, were also found to understand the instruction. This was clear when the teacher repeated the instructions without giving translation in Indonesian, the students understood and directly did the actions.

Excerpt 2:

- Teacher : Get up! get up! (doing hand gesture asking students to get up from their sitting position)
Students : (all students were standing up)
Teacher : Touch your nose! (pointing to her own nose)
Students : (all students were touching their own nose)
Teacher : Jump! Jump! (doing hand gesture asking students to jump)
Students : (all were jumping)
Teacher : Stop! Stop! (doing hand gesture asking students to stop jumping)
Students : (all stopped jumping and laughing)

The teacher then continued to Student 4, who sat beside Student 3 in the back row. He looked busy with his world and less active in participating in the teaching process. He seemed less enthusiastic to listen to the teacher's explanation. He also seemed to have some difficulties in following the teacher's commands. He looked absent-minded for a moment and looked at his friends. Every time the teacher instructed them to practice the command she gave in English; he would follow what his friends did rather than taking action based on his understanding of the instructions given. However, after some time, he seemed to begin enjoying the teaching process

when the teacher asked the students to touch their nose, he did it together with his friends and laughed together.

However, Student 2, who was the only female student, looked very timid. She seemed to be more reserved and less enthusiastic about participating in the activities. When the teacher focused on having Student 1 practice the commands, Student 2 preferred to lie her face down on the desk. She seemed shy in following the instructions in English by her teacher, or it could also be because the session was recorded. When she turned to practice the teacher's commands, she still looked timid and tried to cover her face with her *hijab* or headscarf. However, Student 1 supported her by clapping his hands and said, "Ayo! ayo! (go! go!)". Despite Student 2 seemed not yet ready to practice the command, the teacher did not push her to do so because she understood that Student 2 needed more time to be confident.

The teacher then continued to give more commands to the other students, such as "jump!" and translated the command with "*loncat!*" which was accompanied by her hand gesture. Student 1 was eager to act the 'jump' action. For other instructions in which the teacher gave a command, she would translate it, acted it, and asked the students to act as she did. Every time she gave an instruction, it was Student 1 who volunteered to do the action. He was most active in the classroom. However, after some time, the whole class seemed to enjoy the TPR method, including Student 2, who would also act, even though still shy but would smile and laugh while doing the actions with the other students. At the last stage of conducting the teaching process using this method, the teacher gave instructions without modelling, and the students were able to do the actions.

5. DISCUSSION

The TPR method emphasizes students to do direct activities related to physical activities and movements. As claimed by Richards and Rogers (2007, p. 87) that TPR is "a language teaching method built around the coordination of speech and action; it attempts to teach language through physical (motor) activity". The TPR method in this study used repetition exercises by using commands in the learning process and is found to be suitable to use for children with autism. TPR helps them learn and understand words very well because the students are asked to repeat the actions during the learning process. The repetition of actions helped the students understand the meaning of words. It is argued that learning with physical activity and repetition is the best thing to do since the students will learn through having direct experience (Nurindrianingsih, 2013). They are not only observing the situation in the classroom but also directly involved in the actions and responsible for the results. By doing physical activities, autistic children must move to get direct experience in learning English actively. Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 107) called TPR the "the comprehension approach" where it stimulates students to respond and understand the meaning of a word or a sentence from doing the action of instructions or commands given by the teacher. After some time, the students understand the concept and can respond to the teacher.

In this study, the researchers observed how four autistic students followed the instructions given by their teacher in the form of physical responses. The autistic students were found to recognize the surrounding environment, understand the words

of others, show their desires and feelings, and begin to speak by repeating the teacher's words or commands.

The results of this research support the earlier research such as the one conducted by Dalessandro (2016) where the TPR method was used to teach the Spanish language to students with disabilities. The outcomes were that the students felt satisfied with the application of TPR, and their daily language acquisition increased. Another study in Indonesia done by Windi (2017), taught English vocabulary to autistic primary school students. Before teaching vocabulary to the students using the TPR method, Windi (2017) asked the students to do a pre-test where they were only able to provide 13.3% of correct answers. After the treatment, Windi (2017) gave another test to the students and the results showed an increase of 67.7% of correct answers. Another study using the TPR method in Indonesia was conducted by Ummah (2017) to early childhood students to teach basic English commands. She found out that the young learners understood the commands given and knew how to practice the teacher's actions.

Despite having different variables and student samples, the results of the study by Dalessandro (2016), Ummah (2017), and Windi (2017), and above proves that the TPR method can reduce pressure on children and build an enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom, and as the result, able to increase students' understanding of the material taught and memorizing new words or commands given in the second or foreign language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Thus, the TPR method can be used as a therapy for autistic children, especially to increase response, adherence, and motor skills.

6. CONCLUSION

Everyone has the right to get an education, not only people who are capable but also people with disabilities. In Indonesia, disabled people are facilitated with special education in special schools (or known as *Sekolah Luar Biasa*), which is different from regular schools in terms of the methods. In special schools, students also learn English as one of the compulsory subjects. Among the problems faced by autistic students in learning English is enriching their English vocabulary, and thus this study has proven that this teaching method can help in improving English vocabulary for autistic students. TPR can help students improve in learning English in a more enjoyable classroom atmosphere. In this study, it was further found out that by using this method, the teacher was able to engage all of her students in the teaching-learning process.

This study was conducted on only four autistic students and was limited to the use of the TPR method. Future studies may examine this teaching method for autistic students of different age levels. It is expected that applying this method to a different sample of students, will provide more information to English teachers and practitioners on how to appropriately apply this method in their classrooms.

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