QOSIM : Jurnal Pendidikan, Sosial & Humaniora
http://ejournal.yayasanpendidikandzurriyatulquran.id/index.php/qosim
Volume 3 Nomor 2 Mei 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.61104/jq.v3i2.1111
e-ISSN 2987-713X
p-ISSN 3025-5163

Enhancing Vocabulary Acquisition through Total Physical Response: A Case Study at Al-Munawwarah Elementary School, Riau

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Article received: 07 April 2025, Review process: 11 April 2025,
Article Accepted: 11 Mei 2025, Article published: 15 Mei 2025

ABSTRACT
This study investigates the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in enhancing English vocabulary acquisition among elementary students at Al-Munawwarah Elementary School, Sungai Guntung, Kateman District, Indragiri Hilir, Riau. Using a qualitative approach, the research explores both teacher strategies and student engagement during TPR-based instruction. Data were collected through classroom observations and interviews with English teachers and students. The research subjects comprised 30 students from grades 1 to 6, and the primary informants were English teachers. Results indicated that TPR significantly improved student participation and vocabulary retention, especially among younger learners. However, challenges such as inconsistent application and difficulties in miming abstract vocabulary items were noted. The study concludes that while TPR is a valuable instructional method for young learners, its success depends heavily on teacher preparation and adaptability. Recommendations include structured training programs for teachers and the development of curriculum materials that support consistent and creative TPR integration.
Keywords: *Total Physical Response, Vocabulary Acquisition, Young Learners*

ABSTRAK
Penelitian ini menyelidiki penerapan metode Total Physical Response (TPR) dalam meningkatkan perolehan kosakata bahasa Inggris di kalangan siswa sekolah dasar di SD Al-Munawwarah, Sungai Guntung, Kecamatan Kateman, Indragiri Hilir, Riau. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi strategi guru dan keterlibatan siswa selama pembelajaran berbasis TPR. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas dan wawancara dengan guru bahasa Inggris serta siswa. Subjek penelitian terdiri dari 30 siswa dari kelas 1 hingga 6, dengan informan utama adalah guru bahasa Inggris. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa TPR secara signifikan meningkatkan partisipasi siswa dan retensi kosakata, terutama pada siswa yang lebih muda. Namun, terdapat tantangan seperti penerapan yang tidak konsisten dan kesulitan dalam memeragakan kosakata abstrak. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa TPR merupakan metode pembelajaran yang berharga untuk siswa usia dini, namun keberhasilannya sangat bergantung pada kesiapan dan kemampuan adaptasi guru. Rekomendasi mencakup program pelatihan terstruktur bagi guru dan pengembangan materi kurikulum yang mendukung integrasi TPR secara konsisten dan kreatif.
Kata Kunci: *Total Physical Response, Perolehan Kosakata, Pembelajar Muda*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary acquisition is a foundational component of second language learning, especially at the elementary level, where learners are not only acquiring a new language but are also developing cognitive and social skills that support lifelong learning. Among the various methods explored in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, Total Physical Response (TPR), developed by James Asher in the 1970s, has gained attention for its child-friendly, movement-based pedagogy. TPR promotes language acquisition through physical engagement with verbal commands, leveraging the body as a tool to internalize linguistic input (Asher, 1977). This multisensory method emphasizes listening comprehension first, followed by physical reaction, allowing learners to absorb language naturally, much like first language acquisition in early childhood. For elementary school students, whose developmental stages align with high kinesthetic energy and responsiveness to play-based learning, TPR offers an engaging and potentially powerful pathway to vocabulary retention and practical usage.

However, despite the theoretical strengths of TPR, its actual implementation in classroom contexts remains inconsistent. In many EFL settings, particularly in developing education systems, TPR is often adopted superficially. Teachers may mimic physical gestures or use isolated commands without integrating them into a coherent instructional sequence. Such practices may dilute the pedagogical value of the method, rendering it less effective than theoretically possible. Moreover, while anecdotal evidence and small-scale studies have supported the idea that TPR can enhance vocabulary retention, broader empirical data particularly in the context of Indonesian elementary education—is limited. This raises questions not only about whether TPR is effective in such contexts, but also about whether it is being used correctly and strategically by teachers.

A number of studies have investigated the role of TPR in vocabulary instruction. Lin (2015), for example, conducted a quasi-experimental study with young learners in Taiwan and found that TPR significantly improved vocabulary recall compared to traditional rote memorization. Her research emphasized the importance of consistency in command-based instruction and the necessity of contextual reinforcement. Similarly, Widodo (2005) reported that Indonesian elementary students taught with TPR showed better short-term and long-term vocabulary retention than peers exposed to more conventional teaching techniques. His study highlighted that the physical element in TPR, when coupled with visual and auditory input, creates a robust learning experience that enhances memory encoding. Another study by Hussain and Khan (2020), conducted in Pakistan, found that TPR contributed not only to vocabulary acquisition but also to increased learner motivation and classroom participation—two critical elements for language acquisition at a young age.

More recently, García-Sierra, Rivera-Gaxiola, and Kuhl (2021) examined the neural basis for action-based language instruction in children and found that physical engagement during vocabulary learning activated multiple regions of the brain associated with memory and attention. These findings suggest that TPR may

have cognitive benefits beyond the immediate language acquisition context. Yet, despite such promising results, research also points to implementation issues. Suharyadi (2020), in his evaluation of TPR in Indonesian classrooms, noted that many teachers used TPR without sufficient understanding of its principles. Rather than integrating commands into broader linguistic structures or thematic learning units, some educators reduced the method to a set of repetitive gestures detached from meaningful contexts. Such practices risk undermining the core premise of TPR, which is to anchor linguistic input in physical action as a meaningful experience.

Given this background, it is evident that while TPR holds great promise, its effectiveness in real educational settings—particularly in Indonesian elementary schools—depends heavily on how it is implemented. This creates a gap in the literature that this study seeks to address. Specifically, there is a need for research that not only evaluates the outcomes of TPR on vocabulary learning but also investigates the fidelity of its implementation. Without understanding how the method is applied on the ground, it is difficult to make informed recommendations about its suitability or necessary modifications.

This study, therefore, has two primary objectives. The first is to determine whether the use of Total Physical Response is effective in improving English vocabulary acquisition among elementary school students. This involves measuring vocabulary gains in classrooms that use TPR-based instruction compared to those that use other teaching methods. The second objective is to evaluate the strategies teachers use to implement TPR—assessing whether these strategies align with the theoretical underpinnings of the method and identifying any deviations or gaps in practice. By focusing on both outcome and process, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of TPR in the real-world context of Indonesian EFL education.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform policy and practice. For school administrators and curriculum developers, the findings can offer data-driven insights into whether TPR should be emphasized, modified, or supplemented within vocabulary instruction programs. For teachers, the study can serve as a reflective tool to assess their own practices and make informed pedagogical choices. Ultimately, the research aims to recommend actionable adjustments that can improve the implementation of TPR in elementary classrooms, ensuring that the method is not only theoretically sound but also practically effective.

In conclusion, Total Physical Response offers a theoretically robust and developmentally appropriate approach to vocabulary instruction in elementary education. However, its success in achieving desired learning outcomes depends largely on how well it is understood and applied by educators. By investigating both the effectiveness and the implementation of TPR, this study seeks to contribute meaningful insights to the field of language education and provide concrete recommendations for improving teaching practices in Indonesian elementary schools.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the implementation and effectiveness of Total Physical Response (TPR) in teaching English vocabulary at Al-Munawwarah Elementary School, Sungai Guntung, Indragiri Hilir, Riau, Indonesia. The school was purposefully selected due to its active integration of innovative teaching methods and the presence of experienced English teachers. The research involved 30 students across various grade levels and English teachers as key informants. Data collection was conducted through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, aiming to capture how TPR strategies were applied and perceived in real instructional settings. Observations focused on student engagement, the use of physical commands, and the alignment of teaching practices with TPR principles, while interviews explored students' comprehension and teachers' instructional planning and reflections. The vocabulary taught during the study was based on the actual curriculum to preserve instructional authenticity. Data were analyzed descriptively to identify patterns and themes, with emphasis on evaluating the consistency between physical actions and vocabulary comprehension, as well as the effectiveness of TPR in enhancing students' vocabulary retention and contextual usage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results of this study reveal a comprehensive and promising insight into how Total Physical Response (TPR) is implemented and perceived in an Indonesian elementary school context. By triangulating classroom observations, vocabulary test scores, and interview responses, the study finds that TPR plays a significant role in enhancing students' engagement and vocabulary acquisition, especially in the lower grades.

Classroom Observations and Engagement Patterns

Through classroom observations, it was evident that teachers frequently employed TPR techniques during English lessons, particularly in vocabulary instruction. Commands such as "stand up," "sit down," and "run" were commonly used in tandem with target vocabulary relevant to the lesson's theme. For example, in a lesson on daily routines, students mimicked brushing their teeth, waking up, or taking a shower while saying the English words aloud. These gestures created strong connections between action and language, aligning with Asher's (1977) foundational theory that language acquisition is optimized when it is linked with physical movement.

Table 1. Students' Participation Rate

Grade	Participation Rate
1	90.2%
2	88.5%
3	93.4%
4	70.3%

5	83.8%
6	65.1%

These figures demonstrate that physical participation was highest among younger students, particularly in Grades 1–3, where over 88% of students actively participated. This supports the view of Piaget (1952), who noted that younger children are kinesthetic learners and benefit most from physical interaction with content. In contrast, participation declined among older students, with Grade 6 recording the lowest participation at 65.1%. This decline suggests a potential developmental shift in learning preferences or a need for methodological adaptation. According to Brewster, Ellis, and Girard (2002), older children begin to appreciate abstract thinking and may require more cognitively demanding tasks to remain engaged.

Vocabulary Test Results and Word Retention

To evaluate the effectiveness of TPR in facilitating word retention, students were tested on vocabulary items taught using TPR strategies. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' Word Scores Across Grades

Word	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
Run	80	78	100	69	84	53
Walk	100	83	93	81	72	68
Wake up	97	81	76	64	79	64
Shower	60	52	66	71	80	74
Stand up	75	99	71	68	73	60
Sit down	77	86	90	85	77	80

Across all grades, vocabulary test scores were generally high. Notably, no score fell below 50, suggesting that all students gained a functional understanding of the vocabulary introduced. Grade 3 students achieved the highest average scores, particularly for action words like "run" and "walk," reinforcing the theory that the embodiment of language through TPR leads to better retention (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

However, the decline in scores among older students, particularly for words like "run" (Grade 6 = 53), implies diminishing effectiveness. This may be due to increased self-consciousness among older learners, as well as a preference for less overtly physical methods of learning (Nikolova, 2002). These findings indicate that while TPR is beneficial, its application may need to be adjusted for different age groups to maintain efficacy.

Student and Teacher Interviews: Insights on Perception

Interviews with both students and teachers provided rich qualitative data that helped triangulate the observational and test-based findings. Students

overwhelmingly expressed enjoyment of the TPR-based activities. A Grade 3 student stated, "I always remember the word 'run' because we had to run when the teacher said it." Such feedback is consistent with Tang (2017), who noted that student engagement is directly tied to the physicality and novelty of lessons.

Teachers also viewed TPR positively, particularly for its role in facilitating memory retention and keeping classroom energy high. One teacher remarked, "They remember better when they move. If I just say the word, they forget quickly." These observations align with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that learners are more receptive to language input when they are relaxed and motivated—a state easily achieved through the playful nature of TPR.

Implementation Challenges and Pedagogical Gaps

Despite its strengths, the implementation of TPR was not without flaws. Observations revealed inconsistencies in the way teachers used TPR. While all teachers incorporated physical movement, only some embedded the actions into a coherent lesson structure. In several classrooms, TPR was limited to isolated warm-up activities, lacking integration with the broader lesson content. This sporadic use reduced the method's potential, echoing Suharyadi's (2020) findings that pedagogical inconsistency can undermine TPR's impact.

Furthermore, not all vocabulary items were easily represented through physical action. Words like "shower" or "wake up" required creative miming, and in some instances, teachers omitted physical cues altogether. This issue aligns with concerns raised by Cook (2001), who suggested that TPR is most effective for concrete, action-oriented vocabulary but less so for abstract or less tangible concepts.

Correlating TPR Fidelity and Student Outcomes

Interestingly, student performance on vocabulary tests appeared to correlate with the level of TPR integration in each class. Classrooms where TPR was consistently and contextually applied saw higher scores and better engagement. For instance, the high participation and scores in Grade 3 reflect not only age-based enthusiasm but also the teacher's well-sequenced use of TPR. Conversely, Grades 5 and 6, where participation and scores dipped, showed signs of less structured application. This reinforces Lin's (2015) assertion that methodological fidelity is crucial for TPR's success.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The results of this study carry several implications for classroom practice and curriculum design. Firstly, teacher training should emphasize not just the 'what' but also the 'how' of TPR. Effective use of TPR requires thoughtful lesson planning, creative action design, and consistent execution. Teachers should be equipped with practical strategies for integrating TPR into different parts of the lesson—not just as a warm-up activity but as a core instructional approach.

Secondly, curriculum developers should consider embedding TPR-compatible activities into textbooks and teacher manuals, especially for early grade levels. Given that students in Grades 1–3 responded most favorably, targeted inclusion of movement-based activities could lead to improved learning outcomes across foundational education.

Finally, there should be consideration for adapting TPR for older students by integrating it with other approaches such as task-based learning, storytelling, or role-play. As students grow, their cognitive and emotional needs evolve, and so should the instructional methods. Blending TPR with more mature activities could sustain engagement while maintaining the method's benefits.

In conclusion, this study reaffirms the value of Total Physical Response as an engaging and effective method for teaching vocabulary to elementary students in Indonesia. While most effective in younger grades, TPR can be a versatile tool if adapted appropriately for different age groups and learning contexts. Future research should explore blended models that incorporate TPR with other communicative methods to address its limitations and extend its applicability. Consistent and creative implementation, guided by informed training and curriculum support, remains the key to unlocking TPR's full potential.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Total Physical Response (TPR) is an effective method for enhancing English vocabulary acquisition among elementary students, particularly when implemented consistently and aligned with lesson content. TPR fosters greater student engagement, enthusiasm, and retention, especially among younger learners. However, its success is contingent on the teacher's understanding and application of the method, with challenges arising from inconsistent use, inadequate training, and difficulty representing abstract terms. The findings underscore the need for structured teacher development programs, curriculum integration, and lesson planning that supports the alignment of physical actions with vocabulary goals. Additionally, TPR contributes to embodied learning by reinforcing cognitive processes through movement, creating dynamic and participatory classroom environments. The study also highlights broader implications for education policy, recommending the inclusion of movement-based strategies in national curricula and investment in teacher capacity building. For older learners, hybrid approaches that combine TPR with communicative and digital methods are suggested to maintain relevance. Overall, TPR is not a universal solution but a powerful pedagogical tool that, when used with intention and adaptability, significantly enriches vocabulary learning and classroom interaction.

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