



The Use of Total Physical Response to Improve Vocabulary Mastery of Young Learners in a Rural Elementary School

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-04-09 Revised: 2026-09-09 Accepted: 2026-09-25 Keywords: Interactive Learning; EFL Teaching; Total Physical Response; Vocabulary Mastery; Young Learners. DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i2.12264 Corresponding Author: Dermawan kamadalmuttaqin.kasonaweja@gmail.com State Islamic University of Palopo, Palopo	<i>This one-group pre-experimental study, supplemented by qualitative classroom observation, examined short-term changes in English vocabulary performance following a Total Physical Response (TPR)-centered instructional intervention in a rural Islamic elementary school. Fifteen fifth-grade students participated in six instructional sessions over approximately four weeks. Vocabulary performance was measured using pre-test and post-test scores, while classroom observation sheets were used to document observable engagement during the intervention. Post-test scores ($M = 56.89$, $SD = 11.23$) were significantly higher than pre-test scores ($M = 41.78$, $SD = 13.91$), $t(14) = 3.745$, $p = .002$, with a mean increase of 15.11 points (95% CI [6.46, 23.76]) and a paired-samples effect size of Cohen's $d_z = 0.97$. Classroom observations indicated high levels of observable participation, responsiveness, and enthusiasm during the TPR-centered sessions. Because the study did not include a comparison group, the findings are interpreted as preliminary evidence of a short-term increase following the intervention rather than definitive evidence that TPR alone caused the improvement. The results suggest that TPR-centered instruction is a promising, low-cost, and feasible strategy for young EFL learners in resource-constrained rural settings.</i>

1. Introduction

Vocabulary mastery is a fundamental component of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly for young learners (Andari 2023). Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, students often encounter difficulties in understanding texts, expressing ideas, and participating in communication activities (Afidah and Machfudi 2022). Vocabulary also supports the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Fenuku 2024). At the elementary-school level, therefore, vocabulary instruction needs to build an accessible lexical foundation while keeping learners actively involved in meaning-making.

In primary education, vocabulary learning is especially important because it shapes learners' early exposure to English (Sun and Yin 2022). Young learners generally benefit from instruction that is interactive, concrete, and developmentally appropriate. Movement, visual support, repetition in meaningful contexts, and opportunities to respond physically can make new words easier to process than decontextualized memorization alone (Nunan 2016). These characteristics make movement-based instruction particularly relevant for classrooms in which learners have limited opportunities to use English outside school.

The challenge is amplified in rural and remote educational settings, where access to instructional resources, teacher-development opportunities, and regular English exposure may be limited (Mariyam, Pratiwi, and Meraj 2025; Rosyida, Natalya, and Avivah 2025). In such settings, instructional approaches that depend on expensive technology or abundant printed materials may be difficult to sustain. Low-cost strategies that use the teacher's verbal input, classroom space, and students' physical responses may therefore offer practical value, provided that claims about learning outcomes are interpreted in relation to the study design.

Preliminary observations at MI Al Muttaqin, Mamberamo Raya, indicated several challenges related to English vocabulary learning. Students displayed limited vocabulary knowledge, low observable willingness to use English, and passive participation during classroom activities. Instruction was predominantly teacher-centered, with relatively few activities requiring students to respond physically or interact with peers. These conditions provided the practical rationale for trying a more participatory instructional sequence centered on Total Physical Response.

Total Physical Response (TPR), introduced by James Asher, links verbal language input with physical action (Asher 2017). Learners listen to commands and demonstrate comprehension through movement before being required to produce extensive spoken language. This sequence can reduce the immediate pressure to speak and creates repeated associations between words, meanings, and embodied actions (Baiq Sumarni, Dharma Dev Bhatta, and Kho 2022). For young learners, these characteristics make TPR a plausible instructional option for vocabulary practice because comprehension is made visible through observable responses.

Prior research has reported positive vocabulary and engagement outcomes when TPR is used with young language learners. Studies have examined TPR in general elementary and EFL classrooms, in comparison with other instructional strategies, and in technology-supported or game-based settings (Setiawan, Nurhajati, and Sulistyani 2022; Liu, Chen, and Chen 2024; Faouri, Zibin, and Altakhaineh 2025; Nguyen 2025). Indonesian studies likewise report favorable classroom responses and vocabulary outcomes in elementary-school contexts (Veren, Yulia, and Regina 2023; Susilawati and Sumariyani 2025; Hasanah and Gaffar 2026). Taken together, this literature supports the pedagogical plausibility of TPR, but it does

not by itself establish how a TPR-centered sequence functions in a remote rural Islamic elementary-school setting such as Mamberamo Raya.

The research gap addressed here is therefore primarily contextual rather than methodological. The cited literature includes elementary learners, young EFL learners, and varied TPR adaptations, but the present manuscript contributes evidence from an underrepresented rural madrasah context characterized by limited English exposure and constrained instructional resources. Rather than claiming that TPR itself is novel, this study examines whether a low-cost, movement-based instructional sequence is associated with measurable short-term vocabulary change and what forms of observable classroom engagement accompany its implementation in this particular setting.

Accordingly, this study used a one-group pretest-posttest pre-experimental design supplemented by classroom observation to examine short-term vocabulary performance following a six-session TPR-centered intervention. The quantitative component compared students' vocabulary scores before and after instruction, while the observations described participation, responsiveness, enthusiasm, attention, and peer interaction during the sessions. The design provides preliminary within-group evidence, but it does not permit strong causal attribution because no comparison group was included.

The contribution of this study lies in its context and practical focus. It documents the use of a low-cost, movement-based strategy in a rural Islamic elementary school where exposure to English and instructional resources are limited. It also combines pretest-posttest evidence with descriptive classroom observations to show both short-term vocabulary change and the observable conditions under which the intervention was implemented. These findings may inform English teachers working in similarly resource-constrained settings while also identifying issues that require stronger experimental investigation.

Based on these considerations, the study addressed two research questions: (1) Is there a statistically significant difference between students' vocabulary pre-test and post-test scores following the TPR-centered instruction? and (2) What observable engagement patterns occur during the six instructional sessions? The study therefore focuses on short-term score change and observable classroom behavior rather than making definitive claims about long-term retention, psychological motivation, or the exclusive causal effect of TPR.

2. Method

Research Design

This study was designed as a one-group pre-experimental study supplemented by qualitative classroom observation. The principal outcome was the change in vocabulary scores from pre-test to post-test. Classroom observations were used as complementary descriptive evidence to document how students participated and responded during instruction; they were not treated as a separate mixed-method strand. This description avoids overstating the methodological integration of the two data sources.

The quantitative component employed a one-group pretest-posttest design. Students completed a vocabulary pre-test, participated in six TPR-centered instructional sessions, and then completed a post-test. The pre-test and post-test scores were compared to determine whether a statistically significant within-group change occurred after the instructional period. Because no untreated or alternative-treatment group was available, the design cannot rule out other explanations for change, including repeated testing, normal classroom learning,

maturation, teacher attention, or the additional reinforcement activities used during the intervention.

The design was selected for practical reasons because the study was conducted in a rural school setting where establishing a comparison group was not feasible. It enabled the researchers to examine change within an intact classroom under authentic instructional conditions. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted as preliminary evidence of short-term change following the intervention rather than proof that TPR alone caused the observed improvement.

Research Participants

The research was conducted at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) Al Muttaqin, Mamberamo Raya Regency, Papua, Indonesia. The participating group was one intact fifth-grade class comprising 15 students in the 2024/2025 academic year. The class was retained as an intact instructional group rather than selecting individual students within the class. The setting was relevant to the study because English was learned as a foreign language and students had limited exposure to English outside classroom instruction.

Research Instruments

Two instruments were used: a vocabulary test and a classroom observation sheet. The vocabulary measure comprised 15 objective items involving word-meaning matching and word-recognition tasks and was administered before and after the instructional period. The instrument targeted vocabulary taught across the six instructional topics. Content validity was reviewed through expert judgment involving an English lecturer, an English teacher, and the research advisor. The observation sheet contained ten indicators rated on a four-point scale and focused on directly observable classroom behaviors such as following commands, responsiveness, participation, enthusiasm, attention, and collaboration. Interpretations of the observation data were restricted to observable behavior and were not treated as validated measures of psychological motivation or confidence.

Research Procedures

The study was conducted over approximately four weeks and consisted of pre-testing, six instructional sessions, and post-testing. The vocabulary topics included daily activities, body parts, classroom commands, household items, transportation, and a vocabulary review. The intervention is more accurately described as TPR-centered rather than pure TPR because movement-based command-response activities were supplemented by reinforcement activities during the lessons.

Each instructional session consisted of three stages. During the pre-activity stage, the teacher introduced target vocabulary and reviewed prior material. During the main activity, the teacher modeled target words and commands together with physical actions, and students responded by performing the corresponding movements. During the post-activity stage, students practiced the target vocabulary through educational games, pair work, and group activities. These reinforcement activities were part of the instructional package and may also have contributed to the observed learning change.

After the six instructional sessions, students completed the post-test. Classroom observations were conducted during the instructional sessions to document observable participation and learning behaviors. Because the manuscript reports aggregate observation ratings rather than complete session-by-session numerical data, the observational results are

interpreted as descriptive patterns across the intervention and not as evidence of a measured increase over time.

Data Analysis Technique

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Vocabulary scores were reported on a 0-100 scale using the pre-test and post-test means, standard deviations, and standard errors. A paired-samples t-test was used to test the within-group pre-post difference at $\alpha = .05$. In addition to the exact p-value, the analysis reports the mean difference, a 95% confidence interval for the mean difference, and Cohen's d_z for paired samples. Based on the reported t statistic and sample size, Cohen's d_z was calculated as $t/\sqrt{n}$. Classroom observation data were summarized descriptively and used to characterize observable engagement during the TPR-centered sessions rather than to infer unmeasured psychological constructs.

3. Result

Students' Vocabulary Mastery Before and After the Implementation of TPR

To examine short-term vocabulary change, descriptive statistics were calculated for the pre-test and post-test scores. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores

Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-Test	15	41.78	13.91	3.59
Post-Test	15	56.89	11.23	2.90

Table 1 shows that the mean score increased from 41.78 (SD = 13.91) on the pre-test to 56.89 (SD = 11.23) on the post-test. The 15.11-point increase indicates better short-term vocabulary performance after the instructional period. However, the post-test mean of 56.89 remained modest on a 0-100 scale, indicating that the students had not yet reached a high level of vocabulary mastery even after the intervention.

The Significance of Students' Vocabulary Improvement

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to determine whether the observed pre-post difference was statistically significant. The results, including the confidence interval and standardized effect size, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Paired-Samples Test, Confidence Interval, and Effect Size

Comparison	Mean diff.	95% CI	t(df)	p	d_z
Post-Test - Pre-Test	15.11	[6.46, 23.76]	3.745 (14)	.002	0.97

Post-test scores ($M = 56.89$, $SD = 11.23$) were significantly higher than pre-test scores ($M = 41.78$, $SD = 13.91$), $t(14) = 3.745$, $p = .002$. The mean increase was 15.11 points, 95% CI [6.46, 23.76], and the paired-samples effect size was Cohen's $d_z = 0.97$. This indicates a statistically significant and comparatively large standardized short-term change within the participating group. Because the study lacked a comparison group, however, the magnitude should not be interpreted as the isolated causal effect of TPR.

Taken together, the descriptive and inferential results show a statistically significant short-term increase in vocabulary scores following the six-session TPR-centered instructional period. The findings support further investigation of this approach in rural settings but do not establish that TPR alone produced the change.

Students' Classroom Engagement During the Implementation of TPR

Classroom observations were conducted during the six instructional sessions to describe students' observable engagement. The original manuscript reports overall dominant ratings rather than complete numerical ratings for each session; therefore, the results below are treated as aggregate descriptive patterns and are not used to claim a measured increase in engagement over time.

Table 3. Aggregate Classroom Observation Patterns Across Six TPR-Centered Sessions

Observed Aspect	Aggregate Rating	Cautious Interpretation
Following verbal commands	3 (Often)	Students generally performed requested actions in response to commands.
Interest and enthusiasm	4 (Always)	Students frequently displayed visible interest and enthusiasm during activities.
Responsiveness	4 (Always)	Students generally responded promptly to instructional prompts.
Active participation	3-4 (Often-Always)	Students took part actively in movement-based and reinforcement activities.
Observable willingness to respond	4 (Always)	Students commonly volunteered or responded without prolonged hesitation.
Nonverbal comprehension cues	3 (Often)	Gestures and actions frequently matched the teacher's verbal prompts.
Focus and attention	3 (Often)	Students generally maintained attention during the instructional activities.
Peer collaboration	3 (Often)	Students generally cooperated during pair and group reinforcement activities.

The aggregate observation ratings indicate that students displayed high levels of observable participation, responsiveness, and enthusiasm during the TPR-centered sessions. These ratings describe visible classroom behavior only. They should not be interpreted as validated evidence of psychological motivation, confidence, or a longitudinal increase across sessions because the manuscript does not provide a validated affective scale or complete session-by-session numerical ratings.

4. Discussion

The central finding is a statistically significant short-term increase in vocabulary scores following a six-session TPR-centered instructional period. The mean score rose from 41.78 to 56.89, with a mean increase of 15.11 points and Cohen's $d_z = 0.97$. This standardized change is substantial within the participating group, but the post-test mean remained modest on the 0-100 scale. The result therefore indicates meaningful progress without showing that students had achieved a high level of vocabulary mastery.

A plausible instructional explanation is the embodied nature of TPR. By linking teacher commands with physical action, learners can associate verbal forms with visible and kinesthetic meanings rather than relying only on translation or rote memorization. Asher's TPR framework emphasizes comprehension before extensive oral production, which may be particularly suitable for young learners who are hesitant to speak immediately (Asher 2017). In the present study, students frequently responded through actions and showed sustained observable participation, suggesting that the command-action format made comprehension and involvement easier to display during class.

The findings are best interpreted through the TPR and embodied-learning rationale rather than through broad claims about general learning theory. The intervention repeatedly paired lexical input with movement, demonstration, and guided response. Such multimodal

pairing offers a plausible mechanism for short-term vocabulary performance because learners encounter the same target meanings through verbal and physical channels. The present study, however, did not include a delayed post-test, so it does not provide evidence about long-term vocabulary retention.

Across the cited literature, three recurring patterns are relevant to the present findings: vocabulary association through embodied action, strong behavioral engagement, and reduced pressure for immediate verbal production. Research with young EFL learners has shown advantages of TPR-based or personalized TPR instruction for vocabulary learning, while classroom-focused studies describe active participation during TPR activities (Liu, Chen, and Chen 2024; Nguyen 2025). Studies in elementary and Indonesian contexts likewise report favorable vocabulary and participation outcomes when physical-response activities are incorporated into instruction (Setiawan, Nurhajati, and Sulistyani 2022; Veren, Yulia, and Regina 2023; Susilawati and Sumariyani 2025; Hasanah and Gaffar 2026). The present study is consistent with these patterns, while extending the discussion to a remote rural madrasah context.

The rural context is important to interpreting these results. The school setting was characterized by limited English exposure and constrained instructional resources, conditions that can restrict the feasibility of technology-intensive or material-heavy approaches. TPR-centered instruction can be implemented largely through teacher commands, body movement, ordinary classroom space, and locally manageable reinforcement activities. This makes it practically compatible with low-resource settings. At the same time, implementation still depends on adequate classroom management, space for safe movement, teacher preparation, and careful selection of commands that are understandable to beginning learners.

The improvement must also be interpreted cautiously because the intervention was not limited to TPR alone. Educational games, pair work, and group activities were used as reinforcement, and these components may have supported learning and engagement. Other plausible explanations include repeated exposure to the test content, increased teacher attention, normal classroom learning, maturation, and novelty effects. Without a comparison group, the study cannot separate these influences from the contribution of the TPR-centered activities.

The observation findings should likewise be interpreted as evidence of visible classroom behavior rather than direct measurement of internal motivation or confidence. Students were commonly observed participating, responding, showing enthusiasm, maintaining attention, and cooperating with peers. These behaviors are pedagogically useful because they indicate that the instructional format was workable and engaging in the classroom; however, validated affective instruments would be required to make stronger claims about motivation, anxiety, or confidence.

From an educational perspective, the post-test mean of 56.89 is as important as the statistical significance of the score increase. Although the average gain was meaningful, the final level suggests that many target words may still have required further practice. A six-session intervention should therefore be viewed as an initial instructional sequence rather than a complete solution to vocabulary development. Continued recycling of vocabulary, broader lexical coverage, and opportunities to use words in listening, speaking, reading, and writing would likely be necessary for more developed mastery.

These results have practical implications for rural EFL teaching. TPR-centered activities can offer a low-cost way to make vocabulary instruction more participatory when students have limited English exposure outside school. Teachers can use short command sequences, demonstrations, action-based games, and pair or group reinforcement without relying heavily on digital infrastructure. The present evidence supports considering TPR as a promising and feasible classroom strategy in similar settings, while avoiding claims that it is universally effective or superior to alternative approaches.

Several limitations restrict the strength and generalizability of the findings. The study involved only 15 students from one school, used an intact one-group design without a comparison group, and lasted approximately four weeks. The post-test was administered immediately after the intervention, so long-term retention was not measured. Repeated testing may have influenced performance if identical or highly similar items were used. The TPR-centered lessons also included games, pair work, and group activities, making it impossible to isolate the contribution of TPR. In addition, classroom observations may be susceptible to observer bias, and the aggregate ratings do not permit a detailed session-by-session analysis of change.

Future research should address these limitations by including larger samples from multiple rural schools, comparison or control groups, parallel pre-test and post-test forms, delayed post-tests, and validated engagement or affective measures. Where classroom observation is used, multiple observers or formal inter-rater procedures would strengthen reliability. Such designs would provide stronger evidence about whether TPR-centered instruction produces durable vocabulary gains and how its effects compare with other feasible teaching approaches in rural EFL contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study found a statistically significant short-term increase in vocabulary scores following a six-session TPR-centered instructional intervention with 15 fifth-grade students in a rural Islamic elementary school. The mean score increased from 41.78 to 56.89, $t(14) = 3.745$, $p = .002$, with a mean increase of 15.11 points and Cohen's $d_z = 0.97$. The result indicates meaningful within-group progress, although the post-test mean remained modest and should not be interpreted as evidence of complete vocabulary mastery.

Classroom observations also indicated high levels of observable participation, responsiveness, enthusiasm, attention, and peer collaboration during the instructional sessions. These findings suggest that the movement-based format was workable and engaging for this group. They do not, however, constitute validated evidence of psychological motivation or confidence, and the aggregate observation ratings do not establish that engagement increased systematically from one session to the next.

Given the absence of a control group and the use of reinforcement activities alongside TPR, the findings should be regarded as promising preliminary evidence rather than definitive proof that TPR alone caused the vocabulary improvement. For teachers in resource-constrained rural EFL settings, TPR-centered instruction may nevertheless provide a practical, low-cost option for increasing active classroom involvement. Future studies should use larger and more diverse samples, comparison groups, delayed post-tests, parallel vocabulary measures, and stronger observation procedures to test the durability and causal contribution of the approach.

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