



Exploring Teacher Experiences of Total Physical Response (TPR) to Teach English Vocabulary in Inclusive Elementary Classroom

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 2026-04-26

Revised: 2026-04-27

Accepted: 2026-05-16

Keywords:

Inclusive learning environment, qualitative data analysis, teacher perspectives, Total Physical Response method, vocabulary acquisition

DOI:

10.24256/ideas.v14i1.10298

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore teachers' experiences in implementing the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in teaching English vocabulary in inclusive elementary school classrooms. This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design. The research participant was one English teacher selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and documentation, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results indicate that the implementation of TPR was adaptive in nature, responding to the diverse needs of students. This method was found to enhance student engagement and participation, particularly through the use of movements that facilitate concrete understanding of vocabulary. However, the implementation of TPR also faced challenges, such as classroom management and differences in student characteristics. To address these issues, the teacher employed strategies such as assigning tasks in stages and adjusting the level of difficulty. This study confirms that the success of TPR in an inclusive context heavily depends on the teacher's flexibility and role as a learning facilitator.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is an approach that emphasizes that all students, including those with special needs, have the right to learn together in regular schools without discrimination (Ainscow & Miles, 2009). In practice, inclusive education focuses not only on placing students in a single classroom but also on creating a learning environment capable of accommodating the diversity of students' needs (Oliver, 1990). This requires teachers to employ adaptive teaching strategies so that all students can participate optimally.

In the context of inclusive elementary schools, learning faces challenges due to differences in students' abilities, learning styles, and individual needs. These challenges become even more complex in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, particularly regarding vocabulary acquisition as the foundation of language skills (Nation, 2013). Many students, especially those with special needs, struggle to understand, remember, and use vocabulary. Furthermore, teaching practices that still emphasize rote memorization tend to make learning less meaningful and result in low vocabulary retention.

To address these issues, a more adaptive and interactive learning method is needed. One relevant method is Total Physical Response (TPR), which combines language with physical movements (Asher, 1977). This method allows students to understand vocabulary through actions before producing language verbally, and it creates a more enjoyable and low-pressure learning environment. This aligns with the theories of comprehensible input and the affective filter, which emphasize the importance of a comfortable learning environment in language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Several studies also indicate that TPR can enhance vocabulary comprehension and student engagement in learning.

However, previous research has generally focused on the effectiveness of TPR in regular classrooms and has placed greater emphasis on student learning outcomes. Studies specifically examining how the TPR method is adapted and implemented in inclusive classrooms, particularly from the perspective of teachers' experiences, remain limited. Furthermore, the role of collaboration between teachers and shadow teachers in supporting the implementation of this method has not been extensively explored, even though collaboration is a crucial factor in inclusive learning (Friend & Cook, 2017).

Based on this, there is a research gap in the form of limited qualitative exploration regarding the adaptation of the TPR method in English vocabulary instruction in inclusive classrooms. Previous research has tended to focus on the effectiveness of the method in regular classrooms and has not yet highlighted how TPR is implemented in the context of classrooms with diverse learning needs. Therefore, this study offers a novel approach by integrating three main aspects: teacher experience, the inclusive classroom context, and the application of the TPR method in vocabulary learning.

This study aims to explore teachers' experiences in applying the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in vocabulary learning in elementary school inclusive classrooms. Specifically, this study focuses on: (1) how the TPR method is applied in vocabulary learning, (2) the challenges faced by teachers, and (3) the solutions used to overcome these challenges.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design. This design was chosen because the study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences and practices in applying the Total Physical Response (TPR) method to English vocabulary instruction in inclusive elementary school classrooms. The qualitative approach allows researchers to examine phenomena in their natural context and to understand the meanings constructed by participants based on their experiences (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, a case study was used to contextually describe the application of TPR along with the challenges faced in inclusive learning.

Research participants were selected using purposive sampling, which involves selection based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). The primary participant was an English teacher at an inclusive elementary school in Medan. Participant criteria included: (1) having approximately five years of teaching experience at an inclusive school, (2) having experience applying the TPR method in vocabulary instruction, and (3) teaching in a class with students with special needs. Selecting a single participant was deemed sufficient because this study emphasizes data depth and contextual understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data collection was conducted using a triangulation of methods, namely interviews, observations, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data source and were conducted in two sessions, each lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. The interviews used open-ended questions to explore teachers' experiences in planning, implementing, and adapting the TPR method, including the challenges faced, forms of collaboration with shadow teachers, and perceptions regarding vocabulary learning. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Classroom observations were conducted over two sessions to gather direct data on the implementation of TPR in an inclusive classroom. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer and did not engage in instructional activities. Observations focused on the stages of TPR implementation, the involvement of regular students and students with special needs, and interactions between the teacher and the shadow teacher (Spradley, 1980). In addition, documentation was used as supporting data, including lesson plans, teaching materials, learning media, and learning notes. Document analysis aimed to examine the alignment between planning and the implementation of learning (Bowen, 2009).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) through several stages, namely: (1) repeatedly reading and understanding the data, (2) performing initial coding of relevant data, (3) grouping codes with similar meanings into categories, (4) developing categories into main themes, (5) reviewing and validating the themes to ensure they align with the overall data, and (6) presenting the results in a descriptive-analytical format. This process demonstrates how raw data is systematically organized to yield meaningful themes aligned with the research focus.

To ensure data validity, this study employed source and method triangulation by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation (Creswell, 2018). Additionally, the researcher practiced reflexivity by acknowledging their role as the primary instrument in the research. The researcher documented reflections throughout

the data collection and analysis process to minimize bias and maintain the objectivity of interpretations.

3. Result

The Application of the TPR Method in Vocabulary Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms

A. Adapting the TPR Method in Response to Student Needs

Research findings indicate that the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method is carried out adaptively in accordance with student needs. The teacher explained that this method was not planned from the outset but emerged as a response to the ineffectiveness of previous methods: “audio and visual were not effective... so we used movement.” The teacher then combined verbal instructions with body movements to help students understand the meaning of vocabulary more concretely. These findings indicate a shift from a conventional approach toward a multimodal approach that is better suited to students’ needs in the context of an inclusive classroom.

B. Stages of TPR Implementation in Learning

The application of TPR is evident when teachers introduce new vocabulary by combining words with actions. For example, when explaining the word “eat,” the teacher immediately demonstrates the action of eating: “We demonstrated the action so students understood the meaning.” This method is also used in exercises such as translation and fill-in-the-blank, while still incorporating movements or concrete objects. Observations show that teachers consistently provide instructions, demonstrate, and ask students to imitate without immediately demanding verbal production. This confirms that TPR functions not only as an introduction strategy but also as a reinforcement mechanism that helps sustain vocabulary comprehension over time.

C. Student Response and Engagement

The implementation of TPR has a positive impact on student engagement. Teachers reported that students became more active and enthusiastic: “students became more enthusiastic and interactive.” Observations also showed that students paid attention to instructions, followed the movements, and demonstrated positive responses. Even students with special needs were able to participate without coercion. These results demonstrate that the use of TPR can increase student participation and create a learning environment that is more inclusive and responsive to diverse learning needs.

Challenges in Implementing the TPR Method in Inclusive Classrooms

A. Classroom Management

Although it increases engagement, the implementation of TPR also poses challenges in classroom management. High levels of physical activity make the classroom atmosphere less controlled. A teacher stated: “the class became less controlled because students were too excited.” This finding indicates that the high intensity of activities in TPR can affect classroom stability, thus requiring management strategies that balance activity and control.

B. Diversity of Student Characteristics

Another challenge stems from the diversity of student characteristics in inclusive classrooms. Teachers described students with behavioral disorders and varying needs: “some students suddenly lost control or became unfocused.” This situation reflects that the success of TPR implementation heavily depends on teachers’ flexibility in adapting their teaching approaches to meet students’ individual needs.

C. Difficulty Understanding Abstract Concepts

Teachers also noted that students struggle to understand abstract concepts: “students struggle even with basic reading, let alone abstract thinking.” This finding underscores that students’ cognitive limitations are a major barrier, making concrete approaches like TPR highly relevant for vocabulary learning.

Teacher Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

A. Gradual Assignment of Tasks

To address a less-than-ideal classroom environment, teachers assign questions gradually to refocus students’ attention: “give a few questions, then review them together.” This indicates that shifting to structured activities can help stabilize classroom dynamics without interrupting the learning process.

B. Adjusting Difficulty Levels

Teachers adjust the difficulty level of questions to students’ abilities so that all students can follow the lesson, while still maintaining the use of movements in the exercises. These findings suggest that the implementation of differentiated instruction is a key factor in supporting the effectiveness of TPR in inclusive classrooms.

C. The Teacher’s Role as a Facilitator

Teachers emphasize their role as facilitators in learning: “the teacher should act as a facilitator, not just deliver content.” This situation demonstrates that the shift in the teacher’s role is a crucial element in creating learning that is more inclusive, interactive, and student-centered.

4. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the application of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in vocabulary instruction in inclusive classrooms serves not only as a teaching technique but also as a form of pedagogical adaptation that responds to students’ needs. These findings align with James Asher’s (2009) theory, which emphasizes that language learning becomes more effective when linked to physical responses. In the context of inclusive classrooms, this approach allows students to connect language with concrete experiences, thereby reducing the cognitive load involved in understanding vocabulary. Thus, the effectiveness of TPR lies not merely in the use of movements, but in its ability to directly link linguistic forms with meaning in a way that is accessible to students with diverse abilities.

Furthermore, the findings of this study can be explained through Stephen Krashen's (1982) perspective on comprehensible input and the affective filter. The implementation of TPR creates a more relaxed and low-pressure learning environment, thereby facilitating the language comprehension process. This condition is particularly important in inclusive classrooms, as students with special needs tend to face challenges in processing abstract language. Thus, TPR not only supports cognitive aspects but also contributes to affective aspects by creating a safer, more comfortable, and more inclusive learning environment.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of TPR in this study is also closely related to the implementation of differentiated instruction. This aligns with the concept of differentiation proposed by Carol Ann Tomlinson (2001), which emphasizes the importance of adapting instructional strategies based on students' needs and characteristics. In this study, teachers demonstrated flexibility in adapting activities and the difficulty level of tasks. This indicates that TPR cannot be applied rigidly but must be integrated with the principle of differentiation to effectively reach all students in an inclusive classroom.

However, the findings of this study also indicate that the implementation of TPR is not without challenges, particularly in classroom management. The high level of physical activity characteristic of TPR has the potential to disrupt classroom stability if not balanced with appropriate management strategies. This situation can be understood through Lev Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding, which emphasizes the importance of providing gradual support in the learning process. Teachers' strategies in assigning tasks gradually demonstrate an effort to redirect students' focus without diminishing their engagement in learning. Thus, the effectiveness of TPR heavily depends on the teacher's ability to strategically manage classroom dynamics.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the effectiveness of TPR has certain limitations. Although this method is effective for learning concrete vocabulary, TPR may be less optimal when used for abstract material or content requiring high-level cognitive processing. This suggests that TPR needs to be combined with other approaches to ensure comprehensive learning. Thus, TPR should be viewed as part of a broader learning strategy, not as a standalone method applicable in all situations.

Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate a shift in the teacher's role from that of a content deliverer to a learning facilitator. This change reflects a student-centered learning approach, which is crucial in the context of inclusive education. Teachers do not merely convey information but also create conditions that enable students to actively participate according to their abilities. In this regard, TPR serves as a pedagogical tool that supports the transformation of the teacher's role, as this method encourages active interaction, participation, and engagement among students.

Theoretically, this study contributes by integrating three key aspects: the TPR method, the inclusive classroom context, and the teacher's role. Unlike previous studies that focused more on the general effectiveness of TPR, this study demonstrates that the success of TPR is contextual and heavily influenced by the teacher's ability to make pedagogical adaptations. Thus, this study offers a new understanding that TPR is not merely a language learning method but also a flexible pedagogical practice that supports inclusive learning.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the limited number of participants restricted to a single teacher restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study was conducted within a single school context, resulting in relatively limited data variation. Furthermore, this study has not directly explored the students' perspectives. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve more participants and consider various contexts and viewpoints to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that the effectiveness of TPR in vocabulary learning in inclusive classrooms is determined not only by the method itself but by the interaction between the method, the learning context, and the teacher's role. Thus, TPR should be understood as part of adaptive, flexible, and contextual pedagogical practices in supporting inclusive learning.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in teaching English vocabulary in inclusive classrooms is a form of pedagogical adaptation that responds to the diverse needs of students. Teachers use TPR flexibly as an alternative when other methods are less effective, combining language and movement to help students understand meanings concretely. The implementation of TPR through the stages of instruction, demonstration, and active participation without verbal pressure has proven effective in increasing student engagement, attention, and participation, including among students with special needs. Thus, TPR not only supports cognitive aspects but also creates a more interactive and inclusive learning environment.

However, this study also found that the implementation of TPR faces several challenges, particularly in classroom management and the diversity of student characteristics. High levels of physical activity can potentially make the classroom less conducive to learning, while differences in student ability require adjustments to teaching strategies. Additionally, students' limited ability to understand abstract concepts indicates that TPR has limitations in its application. Therefore, teachers need to combine TPR with other approaches to ensure that learning remains effective and aligned with students' needs.

To address these challenges, teachers employ strategies such as assigning tasks in stages and adjusting the difficulty level of the material. These findings confirm that the success of TPR depends heavily on the teacher's ability to differentiate instruction and effectively manage classroom dynamics. Overall, this study indicates that the effectiveness of TPR in an inclusive context is determined not only by the method itself but also by the interaction between the method, the learning context, and the teacher's role as a facilitator. Further research is recommended to involve more participants and contexts to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

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