



Total Physical Response in Vocabulary Learning: A Qualitative Study in Fourth Grade Students

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-05-27 Revised: 2026-06-28 Accepted: 2026-06-29 Keywords: Qualitative Research; Total Physical Response; Vocabulary Learning DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.10856 Corresponding Author: Salma Zakiyah salma.sejahtera2@gmail.com Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, FKIP Universitas Islam Nusantara	<i>This study addresses low students' engagements and limited vocabulary retention under traditional instruction at a public primary school in Bandung Regency. It aims to examine the qualitative implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method and analyze its role in fostering student engagement. Unlike previous studies that predominantly measure TPR's quantitative effectiveness, this study offers a novel contribution by exploring the deep qualitative nuances and lived experiences of young learners during the physicalization of words. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using the framework (Miles et al., 2014). The results revealed that TPR successfully transformed the passive classroom into an interactive environment, enhancing student immersion and behavioral engagement. Qualitative insights described a substantial improvement in English vocabulary retention, while also uncovering a nuanced spectrum of individual learning preferences, including students who still favored text-based learning. This study concludes that while TPR effectively breaks traditional passivity, primary school educators should practically integrate multi-sensory activities with diverse instructional methods to effectively accommodate distinct cognitive learning styles in daily vocabulary teaching.</i>

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is an essential element of language learning. When learners learn, understand and master vocabulary, it can easily develop language proficiency. Nation calculated that a learner would be required to know about 4,000 of the most frequent word families plus proper nouns to reach 95% lexical coverage, and around 8,000–9,000 families plus proper nouns to reach 98% coverage (Schmitt et al., 2017). Therefore, implementing teaching vocabulary with effective method is crucial for Primary School students as the foundational step in language learning.

Some previous studies have found that students often face difficulties in learning vocabulary, particularly in retaining new words and showing low engagement in vocabulary learning activities (Feng Shan-shan, 2017; Nuraeningsih & Rusiana, 2016; Setiawan et al., 2022) In line with these studies, similar problems were also found among fourth grade students at SDN Pasirlayung 03. Based on preliminary classroom observation, the students had difficulties memorizing vocabulary and showed low engagement during the learning process, resulting in a passive classroom atmosphere.

In vocabulary learning, selecting the right teaching method is very important to ensure an effective and engaging learning process. Therefore, many teachers seek innovative and suitable methods to improve young learners' participation and create a more interactive classroom atmosphere. Some previous research has shown that the Total Physical Response (TPR) method is considered suitable and effective for teaching vocabulary (Dewi & Fatmawati, 2022; Ibrohim et al., 2019; Xie, 2021)

Total Physical Response (TPR) is an approach that recognizes the importance of physical activity in the process of language acquisition. The TPR method facilitates vocabulary learning (Pitaloka et al., 2025). Earlier research also suggested that the Total Physical Response (TPR) presents a suitable language teaching method, as it draws inspiration from how children learn their mother tongue (Putri, 2024).

This method aligns closely with the theory of embodied cognition, which posits that cognitive processes and memory retention are deeply rooted in the body's interactions with the world (Barsalou, 2008). For young learners, whose cognitive development relies heavily on physical experiences, learning is most effective when it transcends abstract text. By integrating physical movement, visual aids and auditory commands, TPR creates a robust multi-sensory learning environment. Similarly, TPR is absolutely essential for success in acquiring languages for students (Asher, 2000).

While several previous study shown that the TPR method is effevtive for teaching vocabulary, most of these study mainly focused on statistical results and were conducted at the secondary school level (Gayanti & Satriani, 2020; Pitaloka et al., 2025). A critical evaluation of these previous findings reveals a significant gap :

while quantitative data prove that TPR improves test scores, they fail to explain how and why young learners experience this cognitive shift. Quantitative metrics often overlook unpredictable classroom dynamics, individual learning preferences, and varying levels of student engagement. Therefore, this study aims to analyze in depth the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in vocabulary learning among fourth-grade students at SDN Pasirlayung 03.

Based on the issues discussed above, this study explores how the TPR method is implemented for fourth grade students at SDN Pasirlayung 03, as well as its role in engaging students and enhancing their word retention. The novelty of this study lies in its in-depth focus on this primary school context which has received limited attention in previous studies.

Conceptually, this study operates on a framework where the multi-sensory nature of the TPR method serves as the primary catalyst to stimulate student engagement; this heightened immersion and physicalization of words, in turn, structurally solidifies mental mapping to maximize long-term English vocabulary retention in young learners.

2. Method

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand and describe in depth the process of implementing the Total Physical Response method in teaching vocabulary rather than focusing on numbers or statistical analysis. Qualitative data are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of human processes (Miles et al., 2014). Qualitative research is interpretative research; the inquirer is typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with participants (Creswell, 2014).

In this study, a collaborative framework was integrated within the descriptive design, where the researcher cooperated with the classroom teacher to introduce and design the TPR activities based on the identified classroom challenges. The teacher then implemented these activities during the lessons, while the researcher acted as an observer to capture the process in its natural environment. This design is highly suitable for answering the research questions regarding how the TPR method is implemented for fourth grade students at SDN Pasirlayung 03, as well as its role in engaging students and enhancing their word retention.

Subject of the Research

The participants of this study consisted of one fourth-grade class with 35 students from SDN Pasirlayung 03, consisting of 17 male and 18 female students along with their classroom teacher. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on specific developmental and contextual criteria. The fourth-grade students were selected because they represent true

beginners who are encountering formal English instruction for the first time in this primary school. Additionally, they have develop adequate literacy skills to express their opinions clearly during interviews (Imanulhaq & Ichsan, 2022). Meanwhile the teacher who is a non-English major graduate, was selected because she is directly responsible for delivering the English lessons in this class.

To manage the depth of the qualitative inquiry, a sub-sample of six students was purposively selected for the semi-structured interviews. This selection was based on academic achievement levels to capture a diverse spectrum of learner preferences, consisting of three high-achieving students and three average achieving students. Furthermore, considering that the participants were minors, strict ethical protocols were maintained; formal approval was obtained from the school administration, and parental consent was secured prior to data collection. To protect their privacy, all students' participants were assigned pseudonyms (student 1 to student 6).

The characteristics of the subject of the research are summarized in table 1 below:

Table 1. Summary of Participant Characteristics

Participant Category	Code/Pseudonym	Gender	Academic Profile / Selection Criteria	Role / Data Contribution
Classroom Teacher	Teacher	Female	Non-English major graduate; primary class instructor	Implemented TPR; Interviewee
Whole Class	4th Grade Class (N=35)	17 Males, 18 Females	True beginners encountering formal English for the first time	Subjects for classroom observations
	Student 1			
		2 Males,	High-Achieving Students	
	Student 2			Acted as interview participants to share learner preferences
		1 Female		
Sub-sample	Student 3		(Based on academic performance and teacher	

Interviewees

recommendation)

Student 4

1 Male,

**Average-
Achieving
Students**Acted as
interview

Student 5

2 Females

(Based on
academic
performance and
teacher
recommendation)participants to
share learner
preferences

Student 6

Data Collection Techniques and Instrument Development

Data for this study were collected by adopting The collection procedures in qualitative research involve four basic types (Creswell, 2014). **First, observation.** The observation was conducted in two phases, the pre-observation to identify the Baseline classroom challenges under traditional lecture methods, subsequently the main observation to identifying implementation of TPR method. The main observations were guided by a structured observation protocol focusing on three primary indicators: behavioral engagement (e.g., student's response time to physical commands, participation in action songs, and use of props), emotional engagement (e.g., expressions of enjoyment or indifference) and physical markers of vocabulary recall during classroom interactions.

Second, interviews. The researcher conduct face to face and semi structured interviews with participants using open ended question. Draft interview guide was thoroughly reviewed and validated through discussions with both advisors and the teacher. The interview guide was designed to elicit deep personal reflections. For instance, a core question posed to the teacher was: "How would you describe the change in the classroom atmosphere when the teaching method shifted from the lecture-based approach to the Total Physical Response (TPR) method?", meanwhile question for students included "Do you enjoy learning English using TPR (Total Physical Response) movements? Why?" (the complete interview protocol is provided in Appendix A)

Third, documents and audiovisual materials. The documents consisted of teacher's lesson plan, student attendance logs, teacher and student book, while the audiovisual materials included digital photographs capturing the students' physical movements during TPR activities, and photos when interviewing participants.

Data analysis techniques

Data analysis is viewed as a process consisting of three interconnected and simultaneous activities (Miles et al., 2014). **First, data condensation.** Data condensation was performed by filtering out irrelevant coversation focusing on the data that directly addressed the research question about indicators student's physical activity and their english vocabulary retention capacity through the TPR method. **Second, data display.** After condensing the data, the researcher organize and presented the information in the form of descriptive narrative text.

The data were arranged based on the research themes and supported by selected interview excerpts from the teacher and students. **Third, drawing and verifying conclusions.** The researcher formulated initial conclusions regarding how the TPR method influenced students' engagement and word retention. These tentative conclusions were continuously verified and cross-referenced with the observational field notes and lesson plan to ensure validity, consistency, and academic trustworthiness before finalizing the definitive findings of the study.

To ensure validity, data triangulation was conducted by cross-referencing observation field notes, interview transcripts, and archival documents (lesson plans and photographs). Additionally, researcher bias was minimized through reflexivity and member-checking; the researcher maintained an observational distance during lessons, and preliminary interpretations were verified with the teacher to ensure accuracy.

3. Result

The findings of this study are presented in a logical sequence based on the three-classroom session conducted at fourth-grade SDN Pasirlayung 03, incorporating observational data, field notes, and interview transcripts from both the teacher and the selected students.

Baseline Classroom Environment: The Traditional Method (Grammar Translation Method)

During the initial pre-observation session, the vocabulary learning process was conducted using the traditional lecture style, specifically the Grammar Translation Method (GTM). The lesson centered on the topic "What are you doing?" which included vocabulary such as reading, writing, swimming and studying. As documented in the teacher's baseline lesson plan (Document Analysis, Lesson Plan 1), the teacher predominantly controlled the classroom discourse by explaining the rules textually, while students remained passive, focusing almost entirely on listening and completing written exercises in their notebooks. There was a notable lack of oral production and physical engagement; student appeared passive and hesitant to speak English.

In a subsequent reflective discussion between the researcher and the teacher, the teacher admitted facing persistent difficulties in teaching vocabulary to her students, inquiring about alternative pedagogical approaches suitable for primary school students. The researcher suggested the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, referencing its established success in enhancing students engagement. Inspired by this scholarly dialogue, the teacher agreed to integrate TPR into the subsequent learning sessions.

Students' Physical Engagement and Classroom Dynamics under TPR

In the second session, the teacher initiated the lesson with an action song warm-up, which significantly altered the classroom dynamics. Students demonstrated high enthusiasm by singing and mimicking the teacher's movements, which was captured in the classroom research photographs (Document Analysis, Figure 1). Subsequently, the teacher introduced vocabulary cards (e.g., swimming, sleeping) integrated with direct physical commands and a cooperative 'charades' game. The observational data confirmed that this physical involvement successfully fostered high student immersion and engagement.

The third session further advance this physical engagement by incorporating physical props (a box and a pencil) to teach preposition through a physical command song: "on in under by (three times), where is the pencil?" following the structured procedures in the collaborative TPR lesson plan (Document Analysis, Lesson Plan 2), students responded accurately by shouting "under!" as they visually witnessed the teacher placing the pencil under the box. The lesson proceeded with direct physical commands, such as "open the book", "point to the book", and "close the door." The observational field notes indicated that all students were highly engaged, responsive, and physically active throughout these contextual commands.

Learner Preferences and Perceived Vocabulary Retention

Post implementation interviews revealed crucial insight into vocabulary retention and personal attitude toward TPR. From an instructional standpoint, the teacher expressed that the TPR method was highly supported, making the learning atmosphere lively, fun and significantly lighter to manage. To gain a balance perspective, the researcher interviewed six students representing differentiated academic baseline: three high achieving students and three average-achieving students. The qualitative feedback revealed a nuanced spectrum of learner preferences:

The highly engage group (four students): four out of the six students expressed immense joy and excitement, stating that learning through physical movement made the classroom experience far more exciting.

The indifferent learner (one student): one student expressed neutrality, noting that learning through either TPR or traditional teacher explanation with

written worksheet was equally acceptable.

The GTM-preferent Learner (one student): remarkably, one student explicitly disliked the TPR method, stating a clear preference for the traditional GTM aproach where the teacher explain the text, and students independently translate and look up words in the dictionary (Yuwono & Triono, n.d.)

Despited these varied personal preferences toward the physical methodology, **all six sudents explicitly confirmed that their english word retention had succesfully increased.** Whe tested during the interview, the students could rapidly recall specific vocabulary learned during the sessions, such as swimming, studying and sleep. However, linguistic challenges persisted; student identified the phrase “take a bath” as the most difficulties due to its multi-word sructure and phonetic complexity (Stengers et al., 2011; Zhou, 2017)

Table 2. Summary of Major Themes, Supporting Evidence, and Participant Responses		
Major Themes	Supporting Evidence	Participant Responses
1. Baseline Classroom Environment (GTM Approach)	- Pre-observation session data	Teacher: Admitted facing persistent difficulties in teaching vocabulary to students and inquired about alternative pedagogical approaches.
	- Classroom observation of passive students	
	- Textual explanations and notebook written exercises	
2. Students' Physical Engagement and Classroom Dynamics under TPR	- Second session observation data (Action song warm-up, vocabulary cards, and cooperative "charades" game)	Field Notes / Observation: Students demonstrated high enthusiasm, joyfully singing, mimicking movements, shouting accurate responses ("under!"), and remaining highly responsive.
	- Third session field notes (Physical props [box & pencil] and contextual commands)	
	- Post-implementation interview transcripts	Highly Engaged Group (4 students): Expressed immense joy and excitement; found movement far more exciting.
3. Spectrum of Learner Preferences toward TPR	- Qualitative feedback	

		from 6 selected students (3 high-achieving, 3 average-achieving)	The Indifferent Learner (1 student): Expressed neutrality; both TPR and traditional text with worksheets were equally acceptable.
			The GTM-Preferent Learner (1 student): Explicitly disliked TPR; preferred translating text and using a dictionary.
			Teacher: Expressed that TPR was highly supportive, lively, fun, and significantly lighter to manage.
4. Vocabulary and Challenges	Perceived Retention and Linguistic	- Post-implementation interview transcripts - Direct vocabulary testing during interviews	All 6 Students: Explicitly confirmed their English word retention successfully increased and rapidly recalled specific words (<i>swimming, studying, sleep</i>), though identifying "take a bath" as difficult.

4. Discussion

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate what happens when a classroom shifts from passive, teacher-centered instruction to active, kinesthetic language acquisition, answering why these changes matter for primary English education.

Interpretation of Findings and Cognitive Meaning

The core revelation of this study is that while TPR successfully breaks the passivity of traditional GTM by leveraging physical-auditory synchronization (Creswell, 2014) young learners still possess deeply ingrained, diverse learning styles. This was clearly reflected in the student interviews: four thrived in the movement-based environment, one remained indifferent, and one explicitly preferred traditional text-based translation. The Grammar-Translation Method

(GTM) is highly effective when used in English lessons for elementary school students (Simamora et al., 2024).

These variations suggest that individual learners may respond differently to the same instructional approach based on their personal learning preferences and previous learning experiences. However, educational psychology research indicates that students' preferred learning styles do not necessarily determine learning outcomes, as there is limited empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of matching instruction to learning styles (Pashler et al., 2008).

However, the most significant finding lies in the universal outcome: all six students—regardless of their personal preference for movement or traditional translation—demonstrated a successful increase in vocabulary retention. This carries profound cognitive meaning. It proves that embedding physical movement into language inputs creates a stronger cognitive trace in the brain (Asher, 2000). The physical actions of mimicking the action songs ("walking, hopping, running") and interacting with concrete props (the box and the pencil) acted as behavioral anchors that solidified memory, facilitating rapid vocabulary recall even for students who conceptually preferred traditional text-based learning.

Rather than merely confirming that TPR improves vocabulary learning, the present findings suggest that its effectiveness stems from the interaction between embodied experience and learners' cognitive processing. The students were not simply memorizing isolated lexical items; instead, they constructed meaning through coordinated physical actions, verbal input, and contextual cues. This indicates that vocabulary learning in young learners may rely more heavily on multimodal cognitive engagement than on exposure to verbal explanations alone.

Significance and Connection to Prior Research

These results challenge the rigid assumption that teaching methods must perfectly match student preferences to be effective. Instead, they highlight the crucial role of affective factors, as traditional GTM often leaves students passive and hesitant to speak due to learning-blocking anxiety, a classic manifestation of the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982; Naghiyeva, 2025; Natsir & Sanjaya, 2014).

Conversely, TPR dismantled this barrier. By transforming vocabulary acquisition into a playful experience (repetition through action), the teacher lowered the students' affective filters, enabling active oral production (such as shouting "Under!"). The teacher's reflection that the classroom became "lively and lighter to manage" underscores that TPR also reduces the instructional burden on primary school educators.

Limitations and Research Contribution

However, this study offers a balanced contribution by acknowledging its boundaries. While students easily recalled single-word items (swimming, studying, sleep), they collectively struggled with the phrase "take a bath" due to its multi-word structure and phonetic complexity. This reveals a distinct research limitation: TPR's effectiveness diminishes when encountering abstract phrasal collocations, as physical movement does not automatically solve articulatory and phonological hurdles. Additionally, because this study was a short-term qualitative intervention with six interviewees at SDN Pasirlayung 03, the results cannot be loosely generalized, and long-term lexical storage remains unmeasured.

Ultimately, this study contributes an authentic blueprint to the field of primary language teaching. It persuades educators that TPR acts as a universal cognitive catalyst for young learners. By proving that kinesthetic learning transcends personal learning preferences and directly locks vocabulary into memory, this research provides a practical framework to transform passive, silent classrooms into active, linguistically productive environments.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in teaching vocabulary to fourth-grade students at SDN Pasirlayung 03. The findings showed that the use of TPR successfully transformed the classroom atmosphere from passive to more interactive and engaging. Through physical movements, action songs, games and direct commands, student become more active and enthusiastic during the learning process. The implementation of TPR also helped students improve their vocabulary retention, as most students were able to recall the vocabulary learned during the classroom session.

However, the findings also revealed that students have different learning preferences. While most students enjoyed learning through physical activities, one student still preferred the Traditional Grammar Translation Method (GTM). This indicated that although TPR can support vocabulary learning and classroom participation, it may not fully match every student's individual learning style. Therefore, teacher should consider combining various teaching method to accommodate different students need.

This study was limited to a small number of participants and was conducted only in one fourth-grade classroom at SDN Pasirlayung 03 within a limited period of time. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all primary school context.

Suggestion

Based on the findings, english teacher is encouraged to use interactive methods such as TPR to create a more active and enjoyable vocabulary learning environment for students. Future researchers are also recommended to conduct similar studies with larger participants, longer observation periods, or different

educational levels to obtain broader insights into the implementation of TPR in English Vocabulary Learning.

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