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Exploring The Implementation Of Total Physical Response (TPR) In Facilitating Vocabulary Learning And Speaking Participation At A Vocational High School

Izzah Putri Ramadhania[1], Henny Dwi Iswati[2]

[1]English Language Education Program, Surabaya State University
[2]Surabaya State University

Corresponding Author: izzah.22034@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Abstract

This study investigates the implementation of Total Physical Response (TPR) in facilitating vocabulary acquisition and speaking participations among vocational high school students. The research was motivated by students' limited vocabulary mastery, low confidence in speaking English, and minimal participation in classroom communication activities. Considering the practical and kinesthetic characteristics of vocational education, TPR was selected as an interactive learning method that integrates language instruction with physical movement to create a more engaging learning environment.The study aimed to examine how TPR was implemented in English learning and to explore its role in supporting students' vocabulary learning and speaking participation. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach conducted at SMK PGRI 1 Sidoarjo. The participants consisted of one English teacher and ten tenth-grade students selected purposively. Data were collected through classroom observations conducted over four meetings and semi-structured interviews with the teacher and students. The data were analyzed through data reduction, categorization, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that the implementation of TPR encouraged active student participation, improved vocabulary comprehension through action-based instruction, and increased students' confidence in speaking activities. The integration of gestures, commands, and contextual practice helped students understand and retain vocabulary more effectively while reducing anxiety in oral communication. In conclusion, TPR provides a practical and contextual approach to English language learning in vocational high schools and can serve as an effective alternative method for facilitating vocabulary development and speaking participation.

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INTRODUCTION

English is an international language and is necessary in education, economics, technology, global communication, etc. English is complicated and requires mastery of all its four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as parts of speech: grammar and vocabulary (Rao, 2019). In the educational context, mastery of English becomes an indispensable skill in an arena where students are urged to compete in the global age.

Yet on the other hand, in the learning practices in school, especially in Vocational High School (SMK) level, vocabulary mastery is still a problem for students. Second language learners have less vocabulary to understand the learning materials and articulate ideas verbally in English. As a result, speaking participations, which are one of the basic communication skills (Han, 2024; Sari et al., 2024), become low. This condition was also discovered at SMK PGRI 1 Sidoarjo; limited vocabulary mastery made students tend to be less involved in speaking activities inside the classroom.

The speaking participations of students are one measure of their success in learning a language, because they show the students' ability to actively deploy the language in communication. Modern time communication is a primary need for any field, and because of this, speech proficiency is required (Anwar, 2021). However, the majority of vocational high school students have little confidence to speak English because they have a limited vocabulary and are afraid of making mistakes.

This problem can be resolved with dynamic and contextual learning methods that ensure theoretical learning as well. For example, Total Physical Response (TPR) from James J. Asher is one of the methods that can be used. More recently, this approach highlights the link between language and physical action in which learners act based on what teachers instruct before generating verbal responses (Asher, 1977). This is said to allow students to learn language more naturally, similar to how first languages are learned.

The TPR method can be applied to the field of vocational education, especially in working with vocational high school students who have a kinesthetic learning style and favor hands-on learning. Vocational high school learning emphasizes practice rather than theory, as students are prepared to enter the workforce (Serly, 2023). Hence, applying kinesthetic learning, like TPR, can better fit with students' learning needs. In addition, this practice can also be implemented in

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English for Specific Purposes (ESP)-based learning, where it is used to teach vocabulary relevant to the students' field of study (Yao et al., 2025).

Some studies indicated that the Total Physical Response (TPR) method positively influences English language learning. According to research conducted by Lestari and Putra (2021), the TPR method can reduce anxiety in speaking learning activities. Moreover, Isnawati and Wahyuni (2023) found that applying TPR in learning could assist the students to be more active and confident in using English. Sukowati and Nurweni (2023) also confirmed that the TPR method can improve students' vocabulary learning and participation.

However, studies on how TPR is applied and on its broadened vocabulary through simultaneous learning of speaking participations in the context of vocational high schools are poorly documented. Most previous studies focus on a single skill—vocabulary or speaking—in isolation. Furthermore, there are still limited studies about the implementation of the TPR method in the vocational high school context, especially in vocational needs-based learning (English for Specific Purposes).

In view of these issues and gaps, it is necessary to explore the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in English learning in vocational high school and how this method supports students' vocabulary and speaking participations. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how the TPR method is implemented in English teaching at a vocational high school and how it facilitates students' vocabulary learning and speaking participation.

METHODS

Research design

This study is a qualitative inquiry into the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method of teaching English language in a vocational high school which used case study design. A qualitative approach was selected since this study intends to explore in-depth the implementation of TPR technique in classroom practices and how it would promote students' vocabulary learning and speaking engagement. Qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena in their natural context and obtain an understanding of meaning through the eyes of participants instead of quantifying variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research setting and participants

The study took place at SMK PGRI 1 Sidoarjo, a vocational secondary school in East Java, Indonesia. The participants of this study were one English teacher and a group of 31 tenth-grade students. However, only ten students who expressed willingness to participate were selected for

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interviews. This study employed purposive sampling in which participants were selected based on specific considerations of the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data collection

Data collection techniques consisted of classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted during four meetings. The researcher acted as a nonparticipant observer and used observation checklists and field notes to record classroom interactions, teacher instructions, students' responses, and speaking participation activities.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with one English teacher and ten students. Interviews with teachers focused on the implementation of the TPR method, teacher experiences, and perceptions toward students' participation. Meanwhile, interviews with students focused on their experiences during TPR learning, vocabulary comprehension, speaking participation, and confidence in learning English.

Documentation techniques were also employed to support the observation and interview findings. The collected documents included lesson plans and photographs of classroom activities.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis involved six stages: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

1. **Familiarization with the Data**

At this stage, the researcher read and understood all the data acquired from observations and interviews. The audio recordings of the interview data were subsequently transcribed.

2. **Generating Initial Codes**

Key elements of data that were pertinent to the research focus were identified, and initial codes were assigned.

3. **Searching for Themes**

These codes were subsequently organized into categories of similar meanings and used to develop preliminary themes.

4. **Reviewing Themes**

Check back to the themes that had been developed to see if they fit with the data that we had collected.

5. Defining and Naming Themes

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The researcher defined each theme clearly and titled it to give an appropriate description of its contents.

6. **Producing the Report**

Finally, the last step was to consolidate the analytical output into a narrated description that is well-described and supported by data from observation and interviews.

The researcher used this analysis to try to identify some themes relating to the implementation of Total Physical Response and how the method helped students learn vocabulary and participate in speaking activities.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, triangulation, member checking, audit trails, and transferability were applied. Ethical considerations were also maintained by obtaining permission from the school and ensuring participants' voluntary participation and confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) Method

Based on the observations conducted from Tuesday, November 4th to Wednesday, November 12th, 2025, in class X at SMK PGRI 1 Sidoarjo, the teacher carried out the learning process in accordance with the teaching module that had been prepared. Each of the meetings lasted one hour and thirty minutes. There were thirty-one students, consisting of 28 male and 3 female students.

This part includes research containing a literature review regarding the implementation of Total Physical Response (TPR) in learning English to support further understanding of the TPR method based on a classroom environment. Through thematic analysis of observation data and interviews with teachers, a number of key themes emerged.

1. Providing Instruction Through Physical Movements

The results of the learning from here gradually, the verbal instructions accompanied by physical movements are included in the learning process routinely. These directives become simple commands that students directly respond to with actions.

"Let's everybody make a face like this. (Observation Data)

They then mimic the expression and seem to laugh, indicating engagement in a learning task (Observation Data).

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Moreover, when teaching the story of Malin Kundang, the teacher explains the meaning of "rich" and then gives the command for that word and asks students to act out by counting some money:

"Can everybody pretend like you're counting money?" (Observation Data)

Students mimicked the moves, and some followed up with, *"Like this, Miss?"* (Observation Data)

The teacher interview results confirmed this finding by stating:

"I always start with the movements when teaching vocabulary. (Teacher Interview)

This shows that the TPR method is applied in the command-response model, where students comprehend the language by physical responses to an instruction from a teacher.

2. The Physical Act of Learning Vocabulary

Teachers also model the meanings of vocabulary words, in addition to giving directions. Teachers model movements that correlate with the meaning of the words so students can have a more concrete grasp of vocabulary.

As in teaching the story of Malin Kundang, which is accompanied by a hugging gesture to describe the word for "mother":

"Let's pretend we are hugging our mama. (Observation Data)

Moreover, the teacher also shows signs of anger in her conflict in the story:

"Let's pretend to be angry." (Observation Data)

There was also a school teacher anecdote about physical demos in interviews:

"I try to do the movements that are most appropriate for what the word means." (Teacher Interview)

Substituting experience for visual and kinesthetic learning means movement in an intentionally designed manner.

3. Teacher-Student Interaction in TPR Activities

According to observation results, the TPR method makes active interaction between the teacher and students. Students listen as well, but instead respond directly to each instruction.

For instance, the teacher prompts students to follow along, and they respond accordingly:

"Like this, Miss?" (Observation Data)

Additionally, in one of the observations, students worked as a group to demonstrate pieces of the story (Observation Data).

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The statement given in the interview indicates that the teacher has supported this finding:

"TPR makes the students more active and involved in learning." (Teacher Interview)

It means that the TPR method creates a more active learning environment, and the teacher forms a two-way process.

4. Physical Response to Verbal Production

It has been found that teacher and students go from a physical response to verbal action over time. At first, students are responding with gestures, which eventually leads to simple vocabulary use and sentences

For instance, when they were learning The Ugly Duckling, students only said individual words in the beginning (e.g., "swim") before they began pairing/combining words into sentences:

"The ugly duckling swims away." (Observation Data)

The same thing happened when learning Malin Kundang, resulting in students voicing the sentence:

"Malin Kundang is wealthy, and he leaves by ship." (Observation Data)

The TPR method helps the learners move from nonverbal to verbal language production step-by-step, using gestures and actions as building blocks of language comprehension.

Total Physical Response (TPR) Method and Vocabulary Learning, as well as Participants in Speaking.

Providing Vocabulary Learning and Speaking Participations Through This Exercise

The portion of this study contains the findings of research concerning the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in students' vocabulary learning and speaking participations. It employed student interview data, complemented with observational data and teachers' interview analysis. The major themes identified were determined based on the thematic analysis as follows:

1. Vocabulary Learning through Movement Association

Results of this study indicated that the TPR method utilizes physical movements that help students grasp and retain lexicon.

Several students said they find it easier to remember words when they pair them with movement:

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"The word 'swim' just sticks in my head right away because it has motion." (Student Interview)

"I don't forget movement easily if it is there." (Student Interview)

This finding is validated by observations, where students repeated learned vocabulary when making the correct movements (Observation Data).

Indicates that the TPR method helps to learn vocabulary through association between words and the body movement, thus being employed in students' memory to reinforce their learning.

2. Student Engagement in Learning

The findings of the research showed that the TPR method is able to make students more excited about learning.

Several students said it made learning more engaging and not as boring:

"There is movement, so learning is less boring." (Student Interview)

"I'm more engaged because I participate in the movements." (Student Interview)

The fact that students actively follow instructions and seem eager to engage in learning activities could also be verified through observations (Observation Data).

Furthermore, a teacher also stated:

"TPR makes it so that students are more active in their learning." (Teacher Interview)

This means that the TPR method is able to generate a more interactive way of learning that inspires students to participate in the lesson actively.

3. Speaking Participation and Self-Confidence

The result of the study shows that the TPR technique can motivate students to participate in speaking and make them more confident.

Some students stated:

"I'm more confident because the movements get me to remember words. (Student Interview)

"I've become a more confident speaker." (Student Interview)

It was also observed when the students started to independently talk about vocabulary or some simple sentences (Observation Data).

Furthermore, a teacher stated:

"Students who are normally quiet are starting to speak out more confidently." (Teacher Interview)

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This suggests that the TPR method concludes in favor of student speaking participation by having a supportive form of physical activity, consequently giving students courage.

4. Limitations of the TPR Method

This study concluded that while TPR may offer advantages, it has its limitations when it comes to language acquisition.

Some students stated:

"I still get so lost in long sentences." (Student Interview)

"I'm still reluctant to speak at length." (Student Interview)

These findings indicate that although TPR helps students understand and remember vocabulary through movement, some students still experience difficulties when they are required to produce longer sentences or speak more extensively. The method appeared to be more effective in the early stages of language learning, especially for vocabulary acquisition and simple language practice, rather than for developing extended verbal communication.

5. Unequal Student Reaction to the TPR Method

The study outcomes showed that not every student had the same response to the TPR method. While some students felt more confident and supported during learning activities, others still experienced uncertainty and hesitation.

Some students stated:

"I've become more confident." (Student Interview)

"I'm still shy even if things are moving." (Student Interview)

These findings suggest that students responded to the implementation of TPR differently depending on their individual characteristics and confidence levels. Although the method created a more interactive classroom environment, it did not automatically eliminate speaking participation or insecurity for all learners. This indicates that the effectiveness of the TPR method is also influenced by student-related factors, including confidence, participation willingness, and learning characteristics

DISCUSSION

The Implementation of Total Physical Response (TPR) in English Teaching at a Vocational High School

This study shows that the TPR method is implemented systematically in a flow of physical instruction, demonstration, and active interaction, and gradually becomes capable of changing

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from movement to verbal responses. These results suggest that TPR is not just used as a time-based practice, but more as a framework for learning. However, the findings also indicate that the implementation of TPR is more supportive for vocabulary learning and simple sentence production than for more complex language structures. Therefore, the method may need to be combined with other teaching approaches to support broader language development.

This finding is consistent with James J. Asher's theory (1977), which says that second language learners should understand the language they are learning through physical actions before being able to speak it. In this study, students used movement to respond to cues right away and only then proceeded to pronounce vocabulary and simple sentences. Thus, this proves how the same principle on which TPR is based, that comprehension precedes production, has been put into practice in a classroom setting.

In addition, this study utilized movement-based instruction methods to support previous research that suggests TPR promotes a sense of more active and participatory learning. In contrast to some earlier studies, which approach TPR as an activity either doing or not doing, this study reveals that the implementation of TPR is ongoing and integrated into learning rather than being added as another activity.

Moreover, the findings of this research show that with TPR, the teacher-student interactions become more active. Moreover, this supports Rahimi and Hashemi (2021), who found that physical activity during learning could improve students' engagement. This study adds an additional insight as it demonstrates that beyond enhancing engagement, these interactions produced a more active pattern of two-way communication in the classroom.

However, the findings of this study further indicate that TPR implementation is contingent on the teacher's proficiency in creating movements that correspond to vocabulary semantics. In addition, some students still experienced difficulties in understanding long sentences and speaking at length, which suggests that TPR alone may not fully support advanced verbal production. This is in contrast with previous studies, which tend to under-emphasize the teacher's strategic role and the limitations of the technique in more complex language learning contexts.

Therefore, this study found that the TPR implementation is not only concerned with using movements but also with planned pedagogical strategies, active interactions between teachers and students, and a gradual learning process. At the same time, the findings suggest that TPR may be more effective when combined with other instructional approaches to help students develop more complex speaking and language skills.

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The Role of Total Physical Response (TPR) in Facilitating Students' Vocabulary Learning and Speaking Participation

The Total Physical Response (TPR) method plays a significant role in helping students acquire vocabulary and build their speaking participations. The kinesthetic approach to language learning, which involves linking vocabulary to physical actions, allows students to actively engage with new words and retain them more easily. By physically performing gestures that correspond to words like "swim" or "duck," students can better visualize and internalize the vocabulary. This approach aids in active recall, making it easier for students to remember the words later.

The study found that TPR also improves speaking participation. Since students are encouraged to speak while performing actions, they are less anxious about pronunciation or making mistakes. This was particularly apparent for vocational high school students, who may feel less confident when speaking in a foreign language. By reducing the pressure to speak perfectly, TPR creates a low-stress environment that encourages students to speak more freely.

This aligns with Liu et al. (2024), which emphasized that TPR facilitates speaking participation by allowing students to use language in context without the pressure of formal grammar or perfect pronunciation. The study also supports Wati (2023), who found that TPR increases students' confidence and helps them speak in a more relaxed way. This is particularly useful in vocational contexts, where language learning is often task-based and students need to communicate confidently in practical situations.

However, while TPR was effective for teaching basic vocabulary and improving speaking participation, it faced limitations when it came to more complex sentences. As students tried to use longer or more abstract sentences, they struggled to speak fluently. This reflects findings from Ghani (2025), where TPR was found to work well for basic vocabulary, but there was less impact on fluency with complex speech patterns. Thus, TPR needs to be supplemented with other language-learning methods to help students build fluency in more advanced speech.

One major benefit of TPR is its ability to increase speaking participation and help students retain vocabulary through active participation. TPR offers a supportive environment where students can practice speaking in context without fear of making mistakes. This contributes to greater engagement and retention of vocabulary, especially for concrete words.

TPR's limitation lies in its difficulty with complex language. While it supports basic vocabulary acquisition and speaking participation, it may not be sufficient for students who need to build fluency with more complex sentence structures or abstract vocabulary.

This study contributes to understanding how TPR supports both vocabulary acquisition and speaking participations. The findings suggest that TPR can encourage speaking confidence

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and engage students in active vocabulary learning. However, the findings also point to the need for additional support when students need to develop fluency in using complex sentences or abstract language. Teachers should combine TPR with other strategies that focus on sentence structure and advanced language tasks to ensure students can progress in their speaking participations.

In conclusion, TPR contributes to vocabulary acquisition and speaking participations by fostering engagement and confidence, making it relevant for vocational high school students. However, its limitations with complex language suggest that it should be complemented with additional teaching strategies to address the full range of students' language-learning needs.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in English learning to understand how this approach helps students learn vocabulary and participate actively in speaking activities at a vocational high school.

The findings indicate that the TPR method was implemented through movement-based instruction, practical demonstrations, and active interaction between teacher and students. The method facilitated students' vocabulary learning by connecting vocabulary with physical movement, making vocabulary easier to understand and remember.

Furthermore, the TPR method encouraged students to participate more actively in classroom speaking activities and improved their confidence in using English. The supportive and low-anxiety learning environment created through TPR allowed students to practice speaking more comfortably.

Nevertheless, the study also revealed that TPR has limitations in supporting more advanced language production and complex sentence construction. Therefore, the method should be combined with other learning approaches to develop broader speaking competencies.

In conclusion, TPR is an effective and contextual teaching strategy for facilitating vocabulary learning and speaking participation at vocational high schools, particularly during the initial stages of language learning.

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