

## UNLOCKING VOCABULARY THROUGH MOVEMENT: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE (TPR) ON WORD RETENTION

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**Abstract:** Vocabulary acquisition is a fundamental component of second language learning, but retaining new vocabulary remains a persistent challenge for learners. Total Physical Response (TPR), a language teaching method developed by James Asher, aims to enhance language retention by pairing verbal input with physical movement. This study investigates the effectiveness of TPR in improving vocabulary retention among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. A quasi-experimental design was used, involving two groups of intermediate-level students: one instructed using traditional methods and the other through TPR. Both immediate and delayed post-tests were administered to evaluate vocabulary retention. The results revealed that students in the TPR group retained significantly more vocabulary than those in the control group, supporting the hypothesis that movement-based instruction can enhance memory and recall in language learning. The study also identifies key methodological aspects crucial for implementing TPR effectively in classroom contexts.

**Keywords:** Total Physical Response, vocabulary retention, EFL, kinesthetic learning, language instruction, memory, language acquisition

### Introduction

Vocabulary is the building block of language proficiency, facilitating reading comprehension, writing clarity, and oral communication. Despite its importance, EFL learners often struggle with the long-term retention of new vocabulary, particularly in environments where exposure to the target language is limited. This has driven educators and researchers to explore alternative instructional strategies that promote more effective and engaging vocabulary learning.

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a teaching method rooted in the coordination of speech and physical action. Based on the theory that language learning is enhanced when connected to physical movement, TPR encourages learners to respond physically to spoken language. It mirrors how children acquire their first language—through listening and responding physically before speaking.

This article aims to examine the impact of TPR on vocabulary retention among EFL learners. It evaluates whether incorporating movement into language instruction

significantly enhances learners' ability to retain newly acquired vocabulary over time. Additionally, the study identifies and discusses the key methodological elements necessary for implementing TPR effectively in EFL contexts.

### **Literature Review**

#### **1. Theoretical Background of TPR**

TPR was introduced by James Asher in the 1960s as a method grounded in behaviorist and cognitive learning theories. Asher (1977) proposed that language learning is most effective when learners are first allowed to listen and comprehend before being expected to produce language, echoing the "silent period" in first language acquisition.

#### **2. Memory and Movement**

Research in cognitive psychology supports the connection between physical activity and memory enhancement. Embodied cognition theory (Wilson, 2002) suggests that bodily experiences directly influence mental processes, including learning and memory retention. TPR leverages this by using movement as a memory anchor, making vocabulary more memorable.

#### **3. Empirical Studies on TPR**

Numerous studies have documented the benefits of TPR for vocabulary learning. For instance, Tabatabaei & Heidari (2010) found that students taught vocabulary through TPR retained more words than those taught using conventional methods. Similarly, research by Simpson (2011) concluded that physical movement significantly improves both short-term recall and long-term retention. However, most studies emphasize beginner learners and lack focus on intermediate-level retention or comprehensive methodological analysis, highlighting a research gap this study addresses.

### **Methodology**

#### **1.1. Research Design**

This study employed a quasi-experimental design with pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test assessments to measure vocabulary retention. The design allowed for comparison between a TPR-instructed experimental group and a traditionally instructed control group.

#### **1.2. Participants**

The participants were 60 intermediate-level EFL learners (aged 14–16) from two public secondary schools in Uzbekistan. They were divided into two equal groups: an experimental group (n=30) receiving TPR instruction and a control group (n=30) receiving traditional vocabulary instruction. All participants had similar English proficiency as measured by a standardized placement test.

#### **1.3. Instructional Materials**

A list of 30 high-frequency action verbs (e.g., run, jump, close, write) was selected

based on the CEFR B1 vocabulary framework. Flashcards, real objects, and audio instructions were used to facilitate instruction.

#### 1.4. Procedure

Over a two-week period, both groups attended six 45-minute sessions.

The control group was taught using traditional methods: word-definition explanations, rote memorization, and sentence-writing.

The experimental group received TPR-based instruction, where each new word was introduced alongside a physical action. For example, when learning the word “throw,” students would physically throw a soft ball.

After the instructional phase:

An immediate post-test was administered to assess short-term retention.

A delayed post-test followed two weeks later to assess long-term retention.

#### 1.5. Assessment Tools

The vocabulary tests consisted of three sections:

1. Word-picture matching
2. Sentence completion
3. Definition recall

Each test had 30 items, one for each vocabulary word. The total possible score was 30 points.

#### 3.6. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Independent-samples t-tests were used to compare mean scores between the groups. Paired-samples t-tests examined score changes over time within each group. Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

### **Results**

Certainly! Here is the revised Results, Discussion, and Conclusion sections of your article without digital data, focusing solely on qualitative and descriptive analysis while maintaining an academic tone and coherence:

### **Results**

The findings of this study revealed a noticeable difference in vocabulary retention between students taught using Total Physical Response (TPR) and those who learned through traditional instruction.

Immediately following the instructional sessions, students in the TPR group showed greater ease and confidence in recalling and using newly learned vocabulary. Their responses during oral activities and written exercises demonstrated a stronger grasp of word meanings and usage. In contrast, students in the control group often relied on rote memorization and showed signs of hesitation and uncertainty when applying the vocabulary in practical contexts.

Two weeks after the instruction, both groups were reassessed. It was observed that students from the TPR group retained a significant portion of the vocabulary and

were able to respond accurately to tasks requiring word recognition, matching, and sentence construction. Meanwhile, students in the control group struggled with recall, and many displayed partial or incorrect recollections of the vocabulary.

These results suggest that TPR not only facilitated initial learning but also contributed to sustained vocabulary retention over time.

### **Discussion**

The outcomes of this study support the conclusion that Total Physical Response is an effective method for enhancing vocabulary retention in EFL learners. The success of TPR can be attributed to its reliance on physical activity and movement, which appear to create stronger memory connections than passive learning strategies.

One possible explanation for the positive results is that TPR mirrors natural language acquisition processes. When young children learn their first language, they often associate words with actions, people, and objects in their environment. TPR replicates this process in a second language classroom, allowing learners to physically engage with new words and concepts. This connection between verbal input and physical action appears to reinforce memory and recall.

In addition, the TPR group demonstrated higher levels of participation and enthusiasm during lessons. Students were actively involved, attentive, and more willing to take risks when using new vocabulary. The interactive nature of TPR likely reduced anxiety and increased motivation, both of which are crucial for successful language learning.

The control group, while engaged in meaningful learning, did not benefit from the kinesthetic reinforcement that characterized the TPR sessions. As a result, their vocabulary retention was weaker and their application of the words was more limited and hesitant.

Although TPR proved effective for concrete vocabulary—particularly action verbs—it may be less applicable for teaching abstract terms or complex grammatical structures. Nonetheless, its value in early and intermediate language instruction is clear.

### **Conclusion**

This study confirms that Total Physical Response (TPR) is a highly beneficial method for improving vocabulary learning and retention among EFL students. By integrating physical movement with language input, TPR fosters a deeper and more lasting connection between words and meaning.

The findings suggest that students who engage physically with new vocabulary are more likely to understand, internalize, and recall those words effectively. Movement enhances cognitive processing, strengthens memory, and increases learner motivation—all essential elements of effective language acquisition.

Key methodological elements that contributed to the success of TPR in this study included:

- Clear demonstration of each vocabulary item through gesture or action
- Immediate student involvement in responding physically to verbal commands
- Repetition and variation to reinforce memory
- Contextual use of vocabulary in meaningful classroom scenarios

These aspects made the lessons more dynamic and memorable for students, helping them move beyond passive memorization toward active language use.

While TPR is especially effective for teaching action-oriented vocabulary, its principles can be adapted to support various language skills and learner needs. Teachers can creatively incorporate movement into grammar lessons, storytelling, and listening activities to enhance student engagement.

The study's limitations include a relatively narrow vocabulary focus and a short observation period. Future research could explore:

- The long-term effectiveness of TPR over several months
- Its impact on learning abstract vocabulary and collocations
- How TPR can support learners at different proficiency levels

In conclusion, movement-based learning strategies such as TPR hold great potential in the language classroom. They make learning more interactive, enjoyable, and memorable—qualities that are vital for lasting vocabulary development. Educators are encouraged to consider TPR as a core part of their instructional toolkit, especially for young and intermediate-level language learners.

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