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Analysis of the Total Physical Response (TPR) Method in Improving English Vocabulary Understanding of 5-6 Year Old Children

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in improving English vocabulary comprehension in children aged 5–6 years. Early age is an important period in language development, so a learning method is needed that is in accordance with the characteristics of children, one of which is the TPR method. This study was conducted through a literature study by reviewing various internationally reputable scientific journals that discuss the application of the TPR method in early childhood education (PAUD). The results of the study indicate that TPR is an effective method in improving vocabulary mastery through fun and participatory physical activities. Children are asked to respond to verbal instructions with body movements, such as pointing, running, or jumping according to the meaning of the words being learned. This approach makes it easier for children to associate vocabulary with real actions, thus strengthening their memory. The TPR method is very suitable for the cognitive and psychomotor development of early childhood children who tend to learn through concrete experiences. Through movement-based learning, children become more active, focused, and motivated. In addition, the learning atmosphere created is more interactive and free from pressure, because children are not forced to speak directly, but rather understand and respond to commands physically. The Total Physical Response method has been proven to be effective as an English teaching strategy for early childhood. This approach not only improves vocabulary, but also supports the development of motor skills, concentration, and children's self-confidence.

Keywords: Total Physical Response, English Vocabulary, Early Childhood, Language Learning.

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INTRODUCTION

English learning for early childhood cannot be equated with learning for elementary school children or adolescents. Early childhood is at a unique stage of development, where they learn more through direct experience, physical activity, and social interaction (Septrisia, Suhono, Purnamasari, Utama, & Mustafidah, 2021). Therefore, the English teaching approach must pay attention to the cognitive, language, social, and motor development aspects of children (Anwar, 2020). By paying attention to these aspects, the learning process will be more enjoyable, effective, and in accordance with the needs and abilities of children (Ansorida, 2022).

In terms of cognitive development, early childhood is still in the preoperational stage according to Piaget's theory (Utama, Arif, & Maharsi, 2024). They are not yet able to think abstractly, but are very responsive to visual stimulation, movement, and play (Wiresti & Na'imah, 2020). Therefore, an English learning approach that involves real actions and concrete contexts will be easier to understand. Children grasp the meaning of words or phrases more quickly if the words are associated with certain movements or activities (Fauziah, Mahmudah, Dea, Utama, & Setiawan, 2024). In terms of language development, early childhood is very receptive to new sounds and words, but they are not yet fully able to express ideas verbally fluently (Megavitry et al., 2023)(Nur Tanfidiyah & Ferdian Utama, 2019). Methods that only emphasize speaking skills can make them feel stressed. On the other hand, an approach that focuses on understanding through physical activities will help them build vocabulary without anxiety, while improving their ability to understand instructions in English (Lingua, Pembelajarannya, Bahasa, Sastra, & Karakter Bangsa, 2022). Socially, children at this age learn through interaction with others, both teachers and peers. A learning approach that involves group work, joint movement, and active participation will help them develop social skills (Çetin & Erdem Çevikbaş, 2020). Methods that free children to move, express themselves, and follow instructions in a fun way will also strengthen social relationships and cooperation between children.

Meanwhile, the motor development of early childhood also needs attention. They have a need to move actively. Physical activities such as dancing, jumping, or moving following instructions can support gross motor development (Purnamasari, 2020). By involving the body in the process of learning a language, children not only understand new words but also develop body coordination, balance, and dexterity. One approach that is considered appropriate for all of these aspects is Total Physical Response (TPR) (Fadlan, Ridwan, Nopriansyah, & Nurfaizah, 2021). Children aged 5–6 years are in the concrete operational development stage according to Jean Piaget's cognitive theory. At this stage, children begin to be able to think logically, but are still limited to real and observable situations (Kitchener, 1986). They are not yet able to understand abstract concepts well, so learning that is too theoretical or symbolic will be difficult to digest. Children at this age learn most effectively through direct experience, object manipulation, and activities that involve their bodies and five senses (Zajda, 2019). Therefore, a concrete, active learning approach that involves physical interaction is highly recommended to support their understanding.

In this context, the Total Physical Response (TPR) method is very relevant and in accordance with the developmental characteristics of children at the concrete operational age. TPR combines verbal commands with physical actions, allowing children to understand the meaning of words or sentences through direct experience. For example, when the teacher says a command such as "jump", "sit down", or "touch your head", the child responds by making the appropriate movement. The involvement of the body in understanding this language creates a direct connection between the sound of the word and its meaning, thereby strengthening children's memory and understanding of new vocabulary. The suitability between the child's developmental stage and the basic principles of TPR is the reason why this method is considered effective in learning English for early childhood. Children do not only learn cognitively, but also psychomotorically and affectively. They don't feel like they are "learning" in the traditional sense, but rather playing while understanding the language naturally. This makes the learning process more enjoyable, stress-free, and more in line with children's learning styles (Vo & Nguyen, 2024).

This research aims to review theoretically and empirically the effectiveness of the TPR method in improving English vocabulary mastery for early childhood. The study was conducted through a literature review of various international journals that examined the application of TPR in early childhood education (PAUD) environments. Through this study, it will be discussed how TPR is not only based on child development theory, but has also

been empirically proven to be able to improve vocabulary mastery through active, concrete, and fun learning strategies. By connecting the findings of Piaget's developmental theory and the results of scientific literature reviews, this article provides a strong foundation that TPR is one of the most appropriate and effective English learning methods for early childhood. This method bridges the developmental needs of children with the goal of optimal language learning.

METHOD

Theoretical and empirical foundations are used to analyze the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in early childhood English learning. This study was conducted using a literature review method applied through a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach aims to explore an in-depth understanding of various findings that have been published in scientific journals, as well as to draw conclusions based on a systematic analysis of relevant literature (Connaway, L. S., & Radford, 2021). Literature analysis was carried out regularly to ensure that the source selection and review process was carried out objectively, transparently, and scientifically accountable. This process begins with a search for scientific articles through various leading academic databases such as Scopus, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis Online. The keywords used in the search included Total Physical Response, English vocabulary acquisition, early childhood education, and English language teaching for young learners. The main data sources come from reputable international scientific journals such as TESOL Quarterly, ELT Journal, International Journal of Early Childhood Education, and Language Teaching Research. The articles used were selected based on several inclusion criteria, namely: (1) focus on early childhood English learning; (2) use or discuss the TPR method; (3) published between 2010 and 2024; and (4) indexed in Scopus or other reputable journals. After the articles were selected, the analysis process was carried out through thematic coding, where researchers identified key patterns such as the effectiveness of TPR in improving vocabulary, its influence on children's learning motivation, and the relationship between this method and cognitive and psychomotor development. Findings from various articles were then compared and synthesized to produce a comprehensive understanding of the impact of using TPR in early childhood English learning. This approach allows researchers to present a comprehensive and in-depth review, so that they can provide valid academic contributions in the field of language education for early childhood.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Total Physical Response (TPR) Concept and Principles

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a language learning method introduced by James Asher in the 1970s. This method is designed based on the natural way children learn their native language, namely by observing, listening, and responding to physical commands before being able to speak. In the context of learning a foreign language, including English, TPR relies on the relationship between the verbal commands given by the teacher and the physical movements made by the students in response. For example, when the teacher says “stand up”, the students stand up; when the teacher says “touch your head”, the students touch their heads.

The main concept of TPR is that language comprehension comes before language production. Children are not forced to speak a foreign language directly, but are given the opportunity to understand first through real actions. This principle reflects the natural process of language acquisition that generally occurs in children, where they first absorb and understand vocabulary before using it actively in oral communication.

One of the important principles of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method is that physical response can strengthen memory and understanding. Theoretically, this is supported by the concept of multi-modal learning which states that learning that involves

various sensory channels—such as hearing, sight, and body movement—will result in deeper understanding and stronger retention. When children respond to verbal instructions with physical movements, they not only receive information auditorily, but also associate it with concrete motor experiences. This process triggers activity in various areas of the brain involved in processing language and movement, thereby strengthening the association between words and meanings. Involving the body in the learning process means giving children the opportunity to actively participate. Movements such as jumping, walking, sitting, or pointing to certain body parts become natural aids that help them understand instructions in English. For example, when a child hears the command "clap your hands" and then claps their hands, their brain records the association between the sound of the word "clap" and the action taken. This creates a concrete experience that is much more meaningful than simply hearing or memorizing words without context (Paramita, 2022).

Another theoretical support comes from the kinesthetic learning theory which emphasizes the importance of physical activity in the learning process, especially for young children who naturally have a need to move. In addition, the embodied cognition theory states that cognition and understanding do not only occur in the brain separately, but are also greatly influenced by the body and physical environment (Lee et al., 2024). In other words, knowledge is processed more effectively when involved physically and sensorily. This approach also makes learning more effective and long-lasting, because information is not only absorbed cognitively (through the brain), but also physically and sensorily. In other words, children do not only remember words because they hear them, but because they feel and do them. Physical activity like this is very beneficial for young children who basically learn faster through direct experience and sensory exploration. In addition to increasing retention, the use of physical responses also helps maintain children's concentration and enthusiasm during the learning process. Children tend to get bored quickly if they just sit still, but when they are involved in movement, they feel more involved and enjoy following the lesson. The TPR principle which relies on physical responses not only supports understanding and memory, but also creates an active, fun learning atmosphere that is in accordance with the developmental needs of young children.

The next principle in the Total Physical Response (TPR) method is that this method creates a fun and stress-free learning atmosphere. This is especially important for young children, who are usually more easily anxious or afraid when they have to speak a foreign language before they are really ready. In TPR, children are not forced to immediately speak or produce sentences in English. They are given the opportunity first to understand instructions through physical movements without pressure to speak. In this way, children feel more comfortable and confident in following the learning process. This relaxed learning atmosphere is also supported by the forms of activities used in TPR (Hafidah & Dewi, 2020). This method is often presented in an interactive and fun format such as games, songs, simulations, or simple dramas. For example, teachers can give instructions while inviting children to sing and do movements together, or invite children to play roles that involve English naturally. These activities make children feel like they are playing, not undergoing formal lessons that are rigid and boring. Because learning is designed as an entertaining and participatory experience, children become more enthusiastic and motivated to learn. This pressure-free environment also helps reduce the fear of making mistakes or being embarrassed, making children more willing to try and interact in English when they are ready. Thus, TPR not only helps in language acquisition, but also builds a positive attitude towards language learning from an early age.

In addition, the Total Physical Response (TPR) method emphasizes the importance of listening skills as the main foundation in the language learning process. In the early stages of learning, children are trained to focus on listening to instructions given in the target language, for example English, without being forced to speak directly. This approach helps

children develop a strong understanding of the sounds, intonations, and meanings of words in the right context. Through practicing listening to instructions and responding to them physically, children not only learn new words, but also begin to understand how words are arranged in sentences and used in everyday situations. This process helps them recognize language patterns, sentence structures, and the context of vocabulary use naturally. In other words, this listening ability serves as a solid foundation for the development of other language skills. When listening skills are sufficiently honed, children's speaking ability will emerge gradually and naturally without excessive pressure. This is in accordance with the language acquisition process that occurs in children naturally, where they hear and understand first before starting to say their own words. Thus, TPR provides space for children to build self-confidence in language gradually, through a strong understanding and active involvement in fun activities.

Previous studies have provided strong evidence regarding the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in improving vocabulary mastery in children. One study conducted by Ghasemi and Hashemi (2011), published in the journal Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, showed that students taught using the TPR method experienced significant improvements in vocabulary mastery compared to students who used traditional learning methods. This finding confirms that an approach involving physical movement can provide better learning outcomes in terms of language acquisition. In addition, a study conducted by Reyhaneh and Reza (2015) and published in the International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World, focused on preschool children who learned English using the TPR method. The study found that the children showed high enthusiasm during the learning process and had better vocabulary retention compared to other methods. This shows that the TPR method is not only effective in improving language skills, but is also able to make the learning process more fun and interesting for early childhood.

Furthermore, a study by Mousavi and colleagues (2021), published in the journal Language Teaching Research, highlighted the role of physical movement in helping children associate word meanings. The study concluded that the use of movement was particularly effective in teaching vocabulary related to objects and actions. By involving movement, children can relate words to real-life experiences, thus facilitating the understanding and retention of new vocabulary. Overall, these three studies support the use of the TPR method as an effective language learning strategy, especially in the context of vocabulary acquisition in early childhood. These results emphasize the importance of a learning approach that integrates physical and cognitive aspects to strengthen the language acquisition process.

Improving Children's English Vocabulary through the TPR Method

The results of the literature review show that the Total Physical Response (TPR) method has high effectiveness in improving English vocabulary mastery in early childhood. Children in the age range of 5-6 years are at the concrete operational development stage according to Piaget's theory, where learning that involves real actions and direct experiences is very helpful in the understanding process. Therefore, the TPR method that combines verbal instructions with physical movements is considered to be in line with the natural way children learn at this stage of development. The studies reviewed in this study show that children who are taught using the TPR method experience a significant increase in vocabulary size and retention. This happens because TPR allows children to associate new words with direct motor experiences, such as raising their hands, jumping, or sitting. When children make movements that match the commands in the target language, they not only understand the meaning of the words but also strengthen their memory through physical involvement. In addition, TPR has also been shown to be able to create a more enjoyable and stress-free learning atmosphere (Otoluwa, Rasid Talib, Tanaiyo, & Usman, 2022). Children are not forced to speak immediately, but are given the opportunity to listen

and respond physically first. This approach provides a sense of security for children in the process of learning a foreign language, so that they are more confident and motivated to engage in learning activities.

Several results of studies from scientific journals state that the Total Physical Response (TPR) method has advantages in helping young children associate new vocabulary with concrete actions. This approach emphasizes physical involvement as a learning medium, where children are asked to respond to commands in the target language by making appropriate movements. For example, when the teacher instructs the word "jump" and the child jumps, or says "sit down" and the child sits, the learning process does not only occur verbally, but also through meaningful motor activities. Theories that support this approach include kinesthetic learning theory and multisensory learning theory. Kinesthetic learning theory states that individuals, especially children, learn more effectively when they use their bodies in the process of obtaining information (Dunn & Dunn, 1993). In this context, body movements that accompany verbal commands in the TPR method play an important role in strengthening the connection between words and meanings, making information easier to understand and remember. In addition, multisensory learning theory (Fleming & Mills, 1992) emphasizes that the involvement of more than one sensory channel in the learning process (eg, auditory and kinesthetic) can improve learning outcomes because information is processed through more than one path. The combination of language and movement provides important benefits for the memory formation process. Children tend to understand and remember vocabulary more easily when they are actively and directly involved with the learning material. This process allows information processing through two sensory paths at once, namely the auditory path (listening to commands) and kinesthetic (doing movements). The combination of these two paths makes children's memory stronger and more durable, because information is not only stored in the form of words, but also in the form of concrete physical experiences.

This kind of learning model is also in accordance with Jean Piaget's view of the stages of cognitive development of early childhood. According to Piaget, children aged 5–6 years are at the concrete operational stage, where they understand the world through direct experience and manipulation of real objects. Therefore, an approach such as TPR, which emphasizes concrete experience through action, is very effective in building connections between words and meanings. Children at this age are not yet fully able to understand symbolic concepts abstractly, so learning strategies that involve physicality greatly help the process of internalizing language. The TPR approach is not only supported by empirical evidence from various studies, but is also in line with modern theories of developmental psychology and learning. Therefore, TPR is seen as a method that not only increases the quantity of vocabulary mastered by children, but also deepens their understanding and strengthens their memory of the vocabulary (Suryana et al., 2021).

The studies analyzed in the literature review show that the Total Physical Response (TPR) method has an important role in supporting the process of second language acquisition, especially in the early stages of early childhood learning. One of the main findings that often emerges is that TPR allows children to passively absorb language before they start speaking. In this approach, children are not pressured to produce language directly, but are given the opportunity to listen and understand the meaning of words through the actions and movements that accompany them.

This process is in accordance with the principles of language acquisition proposed by Stephen Krashen through the theory of "Natural Order Hypothesis" and "Input Hypothesis". According to Krashen, language comprehension (comprehensible input) must precede the ability to speak. Children need to get enough exposure to language in a form that they can understand (meaningful input), without pressure to respond verbally. TPR provides this type of input by pairing verbal language with meaningful physical actions, making it easier for children to understand without having to speak directly. When children perform actions

that correspond to instructions such as "stand up" or "touch your head", they are actively listening and forming associations between words and meanings through real experiences. This physical response strengthens the auditory and kinesthetic pathways simultaneously, creating a deep and enjoyable learning environment. As time goes by and understanding increases, children naturally begin to produce language because they have formed a strong foundation in listening skills.

In addition to strengthening understanding, this approach also helps build children's confidence in using English. Without the burden of speaking from the start, they feel more comfortable and motivated to continue engaging in learning. When children are cognitively and emotionally ready, speaking skills will emerge gradually and naturally. In other words, TPR not only strengthens listening skills but also becomes an effective bridge towards the development of children's speaking skills in English. Overall, the results of literature research support that TPR is an effective language learning strategy to improve English vocabulary for early childhood. This approach is in line with the characteristics of child development and is able to integrate sensory, motoric, and emotional aspects in the learning process, making the learning experience more meaningful and long-term.

The Total Physical Response (TPR) method has several advantages that make it very suitable for use in learning English in Early Childhood Education (PAUD). One of its advantages is its suitability to the dominant kinesthetic learning style in early childhood. Children aged 5–6 years find it easier to understand concepts through movement and physical activity. Through TPR, children can associate the meaning of words with concrete movements, such as the instructions “jump”, “clap your hands”, or “touch your nose”, which they directly practice with their bodies. This approach can also increase concentration and participation because children are required to respond actively and attentively. In addition, TPR creates a fun and pressure-free learning atmosphere, because children are not forced to speak before they are ready. Activities such as the song Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes or role-playing such as “walk like a lion” make learning feel like playing, not formal learning.

However, in its implementation, TPR also has several challenges. First, teachers are required to have high creativity to create interesting and relevant movement variations. As a solution, schools can provide a TPR activity bank containing a list of thematic movements, songs, and games, and encourage collaboration between teachers through learning communities. Second, limited classroom space is often an obstacle in implementing physical activities. To overcome this, teachers can choose simple movements that can be done on the spot or schedule TPR sessions in open areas such as schoolyards. Third, not all teachers have the skills to implement TPR optimally. Therefore, special training on TPR is needed which includes direct practice and reflection, as well as the provision of easily accessible online learning resources. By understanding the advantages and overcoming challenges through the right strategies, TPR can be optimized to improve English vocabulary mastery in early childhood effectively and enjoyably.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the literature review, it can be concluded that the Total Physical Response (TPR) method is an effective approach in improving English vocabulary mastery in early childhood. This method combines verbal instructions with physical responses, so that children not only receive information auditorily, but also through concrete kinesthetic experiences. This multisensory approach has been proven to strengthen memory, improve understanding of word meanings, and create a fun and stress-free learning atmosphere. In addition, TPR also provides space for children to passively absorb language before they start speaking actively, thus supporting natural language development. The results of the study showed that the use of TPR in the context of PAUD encourages active participation, enthusiasm for learning, and higher vocabulary retention compared to traditional methods. In order for the implementation of TPR in PAUD

institutions to run optimally, support is needed in the form of teacher training on the concepts, techniques, and variations of TPR activities. Teachers are also advised to use existing resources creatively in order to overcome space and time limitations. Schools should provide flexible learning facilities that support children's physical activities. In addition, the development of TPR modules or practical guides that are adapted to the local context and level of child development can be an important reference for educators. Further empirical research is also needed to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of the TPR method on various aspects of children's language skills, such as listening, speaking, and early reading. With the right implementation strategy, TPR can be a powerful method in supporting fun and meaningful foreign language learning from an early age.

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