ENHANCING VOCABULARY ACQUISITION OF KINDERGARTEN LEARNERS THROUGH TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE (TPR)

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Abstract: *This article investigates the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method and kinesthetic activities in teaching English vocabulary to preschool children aged 3 to 6 years. Given the unique cognitive characteristics of this age group particularly the absence of literacy skills and the predominance of visual-active thinking conventional text-based instructional approaches prove largely ineffective. The study demonstrates that physical engagement and the coordination of speech with action mirror natural first-language acquisition processes, enabling young learners to establish robust mental associations between auditory stimuli and physical movements. Drawing on a case study conducted at the "Semillero de Amor" institution, the paper identifies three primary benefits of TPR: enhanced vocabulary retention through physical interaction, reduced learning-related stress, and increased classroom participation among shy learners. The author concludes that kinesthetic exercises represent a pedagogical necessity rather than a supplementary activity for kindergarteners. By bypassing traditional academic barriers through sensory and motor experiences, TPR lays a solid foundation for future language development.*

Keywords: *preschoolers, early childhood education, vocabulary acquisition, Total Physical Response (TPR), kinesthetic activities, language teaching methodology, young learners.*

Introduction

Vocabulary constitutes the foundational bedrock of any language system. Without an adequate lexical repertoire, the development of communicative competence remains impossible. If grammar represents the structural framework of a building, vocabulary provides the essential bricks

that meaning to every conversation. In linguistic scholarship, it is widely acknowledged that while limited information can be conveyed with minimal grammatical knowledge, no meaningful verbal communication can occur in the absence of lexical resources. As Rivers (as cited in Nunan, 1991) aptly noted, a rich vocabulary is indispensable because without it, learners cannot effectively utilize the grammatical structures and communicative functions they have acquired, regardless of how well these have been mastered.

However, when teaching preschool-aged children, the process of constructing these lexical "bricks" demands a fundamentally different pedagogical approach than those employed in secondary or higher education. The cognitive characteristics of children between the ages of three and six present unique challenges that render traditional language teaching methods unsuitable.

First, it is essential to recognize that children at this developmental stage have not yet acquired basic literacy skills, including reading and writing, even in their native language. Consequently, they are entirely unprepared to decode written words. For a preschooler, a word exists solely as an auditory image a sequence of sounds that must be associated with concrete objects, actions, or physical sensations. These young learners cannot write down new vocabulary items, read textual explanations, or analyze written content. Therefore, conventional methodologies that depend heavily on literacy skills inevitably fail in the kindergarten classroom.

Second, preschool-aged children exhibit predominantly involuntary attention. Unlike adults, who can deliberately direct and sustain their focus on abstract tasks, young learners' brains respond primarily to stimuli that trigger curiosity, emotional engagement, or physical involvement. In developmental psychology, this stage is characterized as visual-active thinking (or visual-motor thinking), wherein learning occurs through direct physical manipulation of objects and purposeful bodily movement. Abstract reasoning and symbolic manipulation remain beyond their cognitive reach.

These developmental realities pose a significant pedagogical challenge: how can vocabulary be taught effectively without relying on texts, worksheets, or written exercises? The solution lies in instructional approaches that align with children's natural learning pathways. One such method is Total Physical Response (TPR) , developed by American psychologist James Asher in the 1960s. TPR mimics the process of first-

language acquisition by requiring learners to respond physically to verbal commands before producing spoken language. In the TPR classroom, the instructor issues a command (e.g., "Stand up", "Touch your nose", "Jump"), and learners demonstrate comprehension through action. This coordination of speech and movement allows young learners to process meaning holistically, bypassing the need for translation, reading, or writing.

The present article examines the theoretical foundations of TPR, analyzes its application to vocabulary instruction in kindergarten settings, and evaluates empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness. The central argument is that kinesthetic activities are not merely entertaining additions to the preschool curriculum but constitute a pedagogical necessity for effective vocabulary acquisition.

Methods. This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical design. The primary aim is to synthesize theoretical principles from developmental psychology and second-language acquisition research with empirical findings from classroom-based studies. The article does not report original experimental data but rather provides a systematic analysis of existing evidence, particularly drawing on a case study conducted by Arregocés, Lozano, and Morales (2018) at the "Semillero de Amor" institution.

The analysis is grounded in three intersecting theoretical domains:

developmental psychology – specifically the concept of visual-active thinking as the dominant cognitive mode in early childhood (ages 3-6);

second-language acquisition theory – particularly Asher's (1969) Total Physical Response model and its neurophysiological rationale;

vocabulary acquisition research – focusing on the conditions that promote lexical retention in young learners, including repetition, multisensory encoding, and low-anxiety contexts.

The empirical basis of this article is a case study conducted by Arregocés, Lozano, and Morales (2018) at the "Semillero de Amor" private institution. The study involved five preschool participants aged five to six years. Vocabulary instruction focused on animal names in English. The intervention employed kinesthetic activities in which children not only repeated target words after the teacher but also imitated the characteristic movements of each animal.

Data collection methods included classroom observation, teacher journals, and informal assessments of vocabulary recall. The study was

conducted over several weeks, allowing for longitudinal observation of retention and engagement patterns.

The present article reanalyzes the findings of Arregocés et al. (2018) through the lens of three outcome variables: (a) lexical retention, (b) learner affect (stress and enjoyment), and (c) participation patterns among shy students. These categories were identified inductively from the raw observations reported in the original study and are presented in the Results and Discussion section that follows.

Results and Discussion. The implementation of kinesthetic activities and the Total Physical Response method has demonstrated measurable effectiveness in vocabulary instruction for young learners. The case study conducted by Arregocés, Lozano, and Morales (2018) at the "Semillero de Amor" institution yielded results that can be organized into three principal benefit categories.

In the study by Arregocés et al. (2018), five preschool children aged five to six years received English vocabulary instruction focused on animal names. The pedagogical procedure departed significantly from traditional methods. Rather than simply repeating words after the teacher while seated at desks, students were actively encouraged to enact the movements associated with each animal while simultaneously uttering the corresponding lexical item.

For example, when learning the word frog, children not only vocalized the target word but also crouched and jumped in imitation of a frog's movement. Similarly, elephant was accompanied by extending one arm to mimic a trunk and stomping heavily. This coupling of auditory input with proprioceptive feedback created multiple memory traces: the sound of the word, the sensation of the movement, and the visual image of both self and peers performing the action.

From a neurocognitive perspective, this multisensory encoding enhances retention by engaging diverse neural pathways. The motor cortex, auditory cortex, and visual cortex are activated simultaneously, creating a richer and more redundant memory representation than auditory repetition alone. The findings of Arregocés et al. (2018) confirmed that students who learned vocabulary through kinesthetic activities demonstrated superior recall compared to baseline expectations for this age group. Moreover, retention appeared more durable over time,

suggesting that the physical component strengthened long-term consolidation.

This finding aligns with broader research in educational psychology indicating that embodied cognition the principle that cognitive processes are grounded in bodily interactions with the environment plays a particularly important role in early childhood learning. For preschoolers, to know a word is, in a very real sense, to perform it.

A second major finding reported by Arregocés et al. (2018) concerns the emotional climate of the TPR classroom. Traditional language instruction for young children, particularly when it involves worksheets, repetition drills, or corrective feedback, can generate considerable anxiety. Preschoolers are acutely sensitive to perceived failure, and fear of making mistakes often inhibits participation.

In contrast, the TPR sessions observed at "Semillero de Amor" were characterized by playful, joyful, and low-stress interactions. Students were so engaged in games, dances, and movement-based activities that they appeared to forget they were learning a language". The usual pressure associated with producing correct verbal responses was absent because comprehension was initially demonstrated through action, not speech. Children were not required to speak until they felt ready a principal Asher termed the "period of silence".

The reduction of negative emotions has direct implications for vocabulary acquisition. Affective filters emotional barriers such as anxiety, embarrassment, or boredom are known to impede the intake of linguistic input. When the affective filter is low, learners become more receptive to new language and more willing to take the cognitive risks necessary for learning. By creating a friendly, game-like atmosphere, TPR effectively lowers the affective filter, allowing vocabulary to be absorbed more efficiently.

The third notable benefit observed by Arregocés et al. (2018) relates to classroom participation patterns. In conventional, desk-bound instructional settings, shy or introverted children often remain silent, avoiding eye contact with the teacher and refraining from volunteering answers. These students may understand the material perfectly well but lack the confidence or temperament to demonstrate their knowledge verbally in a whole-group setting.

The kinesthetic nature of TPR fundamentally alters this dynamic. When comprehension is demonstrated through physical action rather than public

speaking, shy students find a more accessible pathway to participation. A child may be reluctant to say "jump" aloud but will readily perform the jumping motion when the teacher says the word. Similarly, a student who hesitates to name an animal verbally will enthusiastically imitate its movement.

In the "Semillero de Amor" study, researchers reported that even the most reserved children those who typically remained quiet during traditional lessons participated actively during TPR activities. The physical modality appeared to bypass the social anxiety associated with speaking, allowing these learners to engage with the material on their own terms. Over time, as confidence grew through successful physical responses, many shy students gradually transitioned to verbal production as well.

This finding has significant pedagogical implications. It suggests that TPR serves not only as a vocabulary teaching technique but also as a tool for inclusive education. By providing multiple modalities of response including nonverbal, physical ones TPR ensures that learners with different temperaments and learning preferences can all access the curriculum.

Taken together, these three benefit categories point to a coherent pedagogical logic. TPR aligns vocabulary instruction with the natural learning mechanisms of the preschool brain. Children at this developmental stage are biologically prepared to learn through movement, imitation, and sensory experience. Traditional methods that demand stillness, silence, and abstract symbol manipulation work against this neurocognitive reality. TPR works with it.

The coordination of speech and action a central principle of the method serves multiple functions simultaneously. It enhances memory encoding through multisensory integration. It reduces anxiety by shifting focus from performance to play. And it democratizes participation by offering physical response as a legitimate and valued form of demonstrating understanding.

The findings reviewed in this article carry several practical implications for early childhood educators and curriculum designers.

First, TPR should not be viewed as an occasional "fun activity" reserved for Fridays or special occasions. Rather, it should function as a core instructional strategy for vocabulary introduction, particularly for concrete nouns and action verbs that can be easily demonstrated physically.

Teachers should systematically plan kinesthetic components for each new lexical set.

Second, TPR is most effective when integrated into a broader, multisensory curriculum. While movement is a powerful vehicle for initial vocabulary presentation and practice, it can be complemented by songs, visual aids, tactile objects (realia), and eventually as children develop literacy readiness simple printed labels and books.

Third, the success of TPR depends on teacher energy and enthusiasm. Young learners are highly sensitive to the emotional atmosphere of the classroom. If the teacher presents TPR activities with genuine enjoyment, children will mirror this affect. Conversely, mechanical or half-hearted implementation yields diminished results.

Finally, assessment in a TPR-based program should reflect the method's principles. Rather than relying exclusively on verbal tests, teachers can assess vocabulary knowledge by observing students' physical responses to commands, their ability to imitate actions, and their spontaneous use of movement to demonstrate meaning.

Conclusion. Teaching vocabulary to kindergarten-aged children through kinesthetic exercises and the Total Physical Response method constitutes a pedagogical necessity, not merely an enjoyable supplement to the curriculum. Preschoolers who have not yet acquired reading and writing skills must encounter new language through their bodies and senses in order to comprehend and retain it.

The case study conducted at the "Semillero de Amor" institution provides compelling evidence for the effectiveness of this approach. Through movement-based activities, young learners established strong mental associations between auditory words and physical actions. The playful, low-stress atmosphere reduced the anxiety that often accompanies language learning, while the availability of a nonverbal response modality allowed shy students to participate fully.

By coordinating speech with action, teachers can ensure that the foundational "bricks" of vocabulary are laid securely, creating a robust basis for lifelong language development. The TPR method bypasses the barriers of traditional academic instruction barriers for which preschoolers are not yet developmentally ready and instead accesses the natural, embodied learning pathways of early childhood. For these reasons, TPR deserves a central place in the kindergarten language classroom.

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