

## Impact of Total Physical Response Method (TPR) on Vocabulary Learning in the Palestinian School Context

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### Abstract

This study aimed to examine the impact of Total Physical Response (TPR) method on English vocabulary learning. Using a quasi-experimental research design, a sample of 66 school children at the 5<sup>th</sup> grade were assigned to a control group (n=33) and an experimental group (n=33). The teaching material included 15 words selected from Units 16 and 17 in English for Palestine for 5<sup>th</sup> graders. At the end of the intervention, both groups sat for a post-test to ascertain statistically significant differences between the mean scores of both groups that attribute to the TPR method which was used in teaching the experimental group. The results revealed no statistically significant differences at  $\alpha = 0.05$  in the scores of the experimental group which could result from TPR method indicating that the TPR had no positive impact on learners' vocabulary learning. Based on this, the study provided some important implications for EFL teachers and supervisors to hold specialized training workshops on different teaching methods including TPR method to meet students' learning styles across their levels of study.

**Keywords:** English for Palestine, fifth graders, Total Physical Response, vocabulary learning

**Received:** February 8, 2023

• **Accepted:** April 10, 2023

• **Published:** April 20, 2023

DOI: 10.56540/jesaf.v2i1.48

To cite this article (APA):

Dweikat, K. A., Fayyumi, N., Shehade, A., Jarrar, H. (2023). Impact of total physical response method (TPR) on fifth graders' vocabulary learning. *Journal of English Studies in Arabia Felix*, 2(1), 50-59. DOI: 10.56540/jesaf.v2i1.48

## Introduction

It has been widely accepted that learning other languages promotes the individual's ability to interact and communicate with other people in different cultures (Sandofal, 2005). It is claimed that the development of a child's memory and brain is enhanced by learning a language as early as possible (Faqihatuddinitah, 2016). Learning foreign languages in childhood is particularly recommended because young children are expected to learn a second language more effectively than adults due to the nature of their brains that are still empowered to use the mechanisms related to first language acquisition. In teaching English to children, the teachers have challenging tasks of creating an interesting teaching environment to attract and motivate students to learn. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) maintained that during the preschool years, young children learn about the physical world through their hands, eyes, and ears. However, learning at an early age is not always easy.

In the EFL context in Palestine, school children face challenges in learning English vocabulary. The number of words students have to learn and memorize by heart and recite orally or in written is exceedingly large. Most teachers opt for using the so-called Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) when teaching new vocabulary. Students mostly feel bored and unmotivated during the class because of such a traditional method of teaching vocabulary. It seems to be less effective and monotonous because memorizing vocabulary in such a way may make them be easily forgotten which, in turn, affect the students' learning outcomes negatively (Al-Kadi, 2020; Richards & Renandya, 2002). It has also been noticed that some learners find it difficult to differentiate between spoken and written vocabulary, to classify the different inflections of a word (the different grammatical forms of a word) and to identify the intended meaning of a certain word based on the context. Therefore, creating an interesting learning environment and employing creative motivating methods, in this case, TPR is hoped to play a significant role in improving students' vocabulary learning as well as bringing out the best of them because it engages learners' senses.

### Objectives

The current study basically sought to examine the impact of TPR method on enhancing students' vocabulary learning at the 5th grade because it is a crucial stage in learners' education. The study aimed to answer the following two questions:

1. What is the impact of using TPR method on enhancing students' vocabulary learning?
2. Are there statistically significant differences at  $\alpha=0.05$  between the mean scores of students in the control group and the mean scores of students in the experimental group attributable to TPR method?

## Literature Review

### Theoretical background

Language, as a phenomenon, dates back to the early history of human beings. It has several definitions which indicate its functions, nature and components. Merriam Webster (2021) offers several definitions of the word "language" which all in all reflect the nature and the functions of language. One of these definitions maintains that an individual tends to use certain signs, sounds, gestures, or marks to express ideas or feelings with intended meanings. A second definition considers language to include the words and expressions used and understood by a large group of people. Thus, language is considered the most significant tool for all human beings to have meaningful and interactive communication as well as expressing their feelings and ideas to the others.

English language, as Battle and Lewis (2002) maintained, is the official and the most dominant language all over the world. It is considered as a world language people use to communicate with each other even in the countries where English is not the mother tongue. According to Crystal (2012), the number of people learning English around the world is highly growing. Due to this widespread of English all over the world, many countries,

including the Arab ones, have been trying to adopt English in their educational systems as a second language to help the students speak English almost as their parent language (Warschauer & Zohry, 2002). Therefore, students tend to learn English from the elementary school until university and schools, in general, focus on mastering four skills in teaching English starting from listening, speaking, reading to writing.

In addition to the main four skills mentioned above, there are other subskills used in teaching and learning English to enhance students' linguistic knowledge including grammar, pronunciation, spelling and vocabulary. Thus, mastering a new language cannot be separated from vocabulary. Vocabulary, as a result, has been considered a core component of language proficiency since learning the vocabulary of a certain language plays a significant role in enabling learners to speak, listen, read and write (Richards & Renandya, 2002). For other educators, vocabulary refers to a list or a set of words related to a particular language or the list or the set of words that speakers of that language use (Hatch & Brown, 1995). According to Antonacci and O'Callaghan (2011), the term 'vocabulary' involves different types such as sight-word vocabulary which means the students' immediate recognition of words in print or meaning vocabulary which is based on students' understanding of a certain set of vocabulary, listening vocabulary which indicates the students' understanding of words they hear around them, and academic vocabulary that refers to content-specific words. Within the current research, the term 'vocabulary' focuses on students' understanding of oral and print words.

Learning vocabulary plays a crucial role in enhancing one's achievement of the four basic skills. Read (2000) argued that as far as language teaching is concerned, vocabulary can be viewed as a priority domain. Moreover, it is observed that when students face challenges in learning vocabulary, they would find it difficult to master the main skills (Lacie, 2008). In addition, vocabulary learning has the potential to sharpen one's ability to think, to express spoken or written thoughts and ideas as well as exchanging information. In the same vein, Thornbury (2002) clarified that short messages could be spoken without resorting to correct grammar. A lack of vocabulary, however, would make it difficult for them to convey messages effectively.

Furthermore, because English is remarkably different from Arabic language in many various aspects, many different obstacles have long been and still encountered during teaching and learning English vocabulary at schools. For example, the large number of words needed by student to learn and memorize, the difference between spoken and written vocabulary, the different inflections used in English to form words, and impact of context on identifying the meaning of some given words. Such difficulties, in particular, are common among elementary students or those who are novice in learning English. In addition to the obstacles mentioned above, students also feel bored and unmotivated during the class because of the traditional method used to teach them in which the teacher often tends to ask the students to memorize certain sets of vocabulary by heart and recite them orally or in written (Rohmatillah, 2014). However, such a method seems to be less effective and monotonous. In addition, memorizing vocabulary in such a way may make them be easily forgotten. In other words, students learn vocabulary step by step and it takes long time to build their vocabulary knowledge which indicates that a single usage of a word is not enough to learn it (Miller & Rilling, 2020). Hence, creating an interesting learning environment tends to be one important component for teaching English (Al-Kadi, 2020).

### **Total Physical Response (TPR)**

In 1965, the American psychologist James Asher developed the TPR method that enables using physical movements and maintains some interaction between speech and action, to teach language and vocabulary which can be used among all students, especially at the elementary stages. This teaching method has the potential to reduce students' stress when learning a foreign language and thereby encourage them to build some kind of proficiency (Freeman, 2000). Upon the foundation of the TPR method, there has been a large number of studies which aimed at investigating the influence of using TPR on teaching

English vocabulary. The method is deemed interesting and motivating for effective learning. It is hence important to investigate its impact on the 5th graders vocabulary learning.

### Previous Studies

A great deal of research has been conducted around the globe to investigate the merits and advantages of using TPR as a method of teaching languages. To name a few, in the Thai EFL context, Magnussen (2021) sought to find out whether songs and total physical response (TPR) could enhance preschoolers' vocabulary acquisition. The sample comprised seventy-two preschoolers aged between four to five. The study employed the mixed – method approach using two tools: vocabulary knowledge tests and video recordings using hidden cameras to capture the participants interactions during the intervention. Three classrooms for six weeks used TPR, songs, and a mixture of both to teach 12 target words. The findings revealed that using songs and TPR at the same time rather than one single tool improved vocabulary acquisition significantly.

Lubis (2020) conducted a study on the seventh-grade students to examine their vocabulary mastery using TPR method. Classroom Action Research design was applied on 25 students of VII-1 and the English teacher of MTs Hidayatussalam was the observer. A cycle of four phases including planning, acting, observing, and reflecting was followed for each cycle. To collect the required data, qualitative interviews, observation, diary notes, and documentation were used. In addition, quantitative pre and post vocabulary tests were administered. The results revealed that students' vocabulary outcomes significantly improved using TPR method.

Miskiyah and Amalia (2020) explored the impact of using TPR method as well as exploring students and teachers' perspectives towards this method. A descriptive qualitative design, using an interview and an observation, was followed. A total of 22 fourth-grade students from MI Robayan participated in the research study. The TPR method was employed in addition to picture cards and songs. Results indicated that TPR helped the 4th grade students to practice English vocabulary verbally and physically which enhanced their understanding and memorization. Furthermore, TPR Method made them feel more comfortable, active and motivated. In addition, the findings indicated that students and teachers had positive perceptions towards the usage of using TPR in their classes.

Coşar and Orhan (2019) demonstrated the effectiveness of TPR method as a pedagogical tool to learn the target vocabulary to kindergarten students in Physical Education and Play as well as developing foreign language communication skills through physical movements and mostly imperative moods. The study was carried out among 32 kindergarten children in Bursa Private Tan Schools. A pretest, conducted in the 1st week, and a posttest, administered in the 8th week, were applied on both the control and the experimental groups. Certain English words selected from the kindergarten curriculum were taught to the control group using a traditional method. On the other hand, the same list of words was taught to the experimental group using the TPR method. Findings showed that TPR was superior to the traditional method in terms of effectiveness, fun, and motivation when acquiring English vocabulary.

In a different context, Mariyam and Musfiroh (2019) investigated how TPR can improve EFL vocabulary learning of 5-6 - year- old children. Fifteen Kindergarten children from TK An-Nisa, Indonesia participated in the research. The English words used were ones that kids regularly hear and use in their daily lives. These words included nouns, verbs and adjectives. The findings showed that employing the TPR method, all youngsters shown a noteworthy excitement for learning. In terms of the children's proficiency with English vocabulary, they did better in nouns category, followed by the verbs and adjectives.

In Fahrurrozi's (2017) action research study, forty third -grade students at the Indonesian elementary school of Guntur comprised a random sample used to examine the impact of using TPR on their vocabulary learning. To achieve this objective, the Kemmis and Taggart cycle model of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting was utilized. In addition to

pre- and post-tests, field notes and action-based monitoring tools were used. Results revealed that the TPR method had a positive impact on pupils' vocabulary mastery.

Safitri, Setiyadi, and Huzairin (2017) explored how many words students used appropriately when using the TPR approach, as well as whether there was a statistically significant difference in the students' vocabulary mastery after the adoption of the method. A mixed-research design, using vocabulary tests and a qualitative observation sheet, was conducted among 15 fifth grade students of SDN 3 Mulya Asri. Based on the observation and the tests results, it was found that the students made progress in vocabulary mastery and they could learn vocabulary more easily using TPR.

Rahmi (2017) examined the influence of TPR method on enhancing the sixth-grade EFL students' vocabulary skill as well as identifying the benefits of this method in teaching vocabulary. An action research design utilizing pre-post vocabulary tests, classroom observation and diary notes were used. Three male students were chosen from the sixth grade of Negeri, Binjai. Regarding the results, the students' outcomes in the post test (67.7%) was higher than their outcomes in the pretest (13.3%) which meant that their English vocabulary learning was enhanced. In other words, TPR helped students remember the English words easier using physical movements.

Susanti (2017) applied a quasi-experimental study at SDN Sariwangi, aiming to check out the influence of TPR method on students' vocabulary mastery. This study was conducted among 62 third grade students using quantitative pre and post vocabulary tests. The study involved experimental and control groups with thirty- one students in each group. The researcher compared between the scores of the pre-test, conducted before implementing TPR method, and the scores of the post-test, conducted after implementing it. The findings demonstrated that the vocabulary mastery of most students improved after the TPR method had been applied.

Bahtiar (2017) employed a collaborative action research consisting of four steps including planning an action, implementing the action, observing, and finally reflecting, at MI DARUL ULUM Widang, Tuban. The study basically aimed to solve the problems students face in English vocabulary learning. Observation checklists and field notes were used to collect the required data from 18 fourth-year students. Based on the results, the pupils' language achievement before and after the treatment showed a substantial change. The TPR method was therefore successful in helping students develop their vocabulary skills and also helped them in acquiring the new terminology quickly and effortlessly.

To examine the role of TPR method in enhancing the first-graders' vocabulary mastery in one Islamic elementary school in Bandung, Sariyati's (2013) employed a quasi-experimental design using pre and post-tests. The experimental group was taught utilizing TPR whereas the control group received instruction using the traditional method. By comparing the control group's pre- and post-test results, it was demonstrated that there is no significant difference between them. However, there was a substantial difference in the experimental group's pre- and post-test results. In other words, the TPR method significantly aided the students' acquisition of vocabulary.

Suryaningsih and Budiarti (2012) carried out action research to identify the challenges third grade students face in mastering vocabulary using the traditional methods. To achieve this objective, the TPR method was applied. Data were collected using tests, a questionnaire, and observation checklists. The findings showed that TPR helped students to memorize the new vocabulary effectively which, in turn, enhanced their learning.

Likewise, Munoz and Forero (2011) sought to show the effects of TPR on teaching English vocabulary to third graders at the "Gamma" school in Pereira, Colombia. To this end, field notes and observations were used to compile the necessary data for a descriptive and interpretive case study. The class consisted of thirty-two students with low language proficiency, however, the study focused on six students. The participants were instructed utilizing traditional language teaching techniques, where the teacher is the focal point of the class. The children were then enrolled in a TPR-based English vocabulary learning program. The findings demonstrated that teaching English vocabulary to kids via TPR made their

learning faster and simpler. The stress-free setting made kids more attentive and motivated to learn the target language.

Fadillah (2011) investigated the efficiency of TPR method in teaching vocabulary to seventh grade students at a junior high School in Kebajikan. The study utilized documentation and tests to collect the required data from 30 seventh- grade students. The findings revealed that the TPR method was effective since it helped the students to be more interested and engaged. Besides, the method helped students to learn English vocabulary more easily and actively than the traditional method.

The aforementioned studies investigated the impact of TPR method on learning English vocabulary using quantitative research design (Coşar & Orhan, 2019; Mariyam & Musfiroh, 2019; Susanti, 2017; Sariyati, 2013) as well as qualitative research design (Miskiyah & Amalia, 2020; Bahtiar, 2017). Also, some studies employed mixed-method research design (Magnussen, 2021; Lubis, 2020; Fahrurrozi, 2017; Safitri et al., 2017; Rahmi, 2017; Suryaningsih & Budiarti, 2012; Munoz & Forero, 2011; Fadillah, 2011). Furthermore, four studies targeted kindergarten students (Coşar and Orhan, 2019; Mariyam & Musfiroh, 2019; Magnussen, 2021) while the rest targeted students from third to seventh grades. None of the aforementioned studies was conducted in Palestine or even in the Arab world. It is worth mentioning that all these studies reported positive impact of TPR vocabulary learning. To the researchers' best knowledge, the current study might be the first in Palestine that aimed to examine the impact of TPR. The researcher benefited from the previous studies to conduct the current study in the Palestinian EFL school context.

## Method

This quasi-experimental study investigated the impact of TPR method on enhancing 5th graders' vocabulary learning at boys School in Palestine. The participants were divided into two groups: control and experimental. The control group was taught through the traditional method while the experimental group learned the same material through the TPR method. The means and standard deviations of the students in both groups were adopted instead of the pre-test. After the treatment, a post-test was administered on the two groups.

### Participants

The sample of the study comprised 66 fifth graders who were divided into two groups: a control ( $n=33$ ) and an experimental ( $n=33$ ) group. Based on the nature of this action research, sampling was purposively done because one of the researchers works as a teacher at the target school and that facilitated getting an approval to conduct the study.

### Instruments

A post-test was constructed by the teacher, who is also a co-author of this paper, with the help of her supervisor. The test generally focused on comparing the vocabulary achievement of the students in the control group with the achievement of students in the experimental group. The English vocabulary post-test was presented to five EFL experts including, two teachers who usually teach this learner cohort, the EFL supervisor and two university instructors. Their comments and suggestions were taken into consideration to produce the modified version of the test. To ensure the reliability of the post-test, the researchers administered the same test on a third section of the fifth graders before the treatment. The results of the two tests were processed using Cronbach's Alpha and the reliability was 0.763 which is acceptable to conduct the study.

### Procedures

At the beginning of the study, the researchers agreed on choosing the 5th grade students in the public schools to be the population. Then, as one of the researchers teach at the target school, the decision was to apply the study there. Hence, the sample included 66

students who were divided into two groups: the control and the experimental. The teaching material was determined to include 15 words selected from Units 16 and 17 in English for Palestine curricula for 5th graders. After that, means and standard deviations of the students in both control and experimental groups were used instead of the pre-test due to the fact that the one of the researchers is the teacher who conducted the study and she knows well the levels of the students. While the students in the experimental group were taught using the TPR method, the students in the control group were instructed using the conventional approach. At the end of the intervention, both the control and experimental groups sat for the post-test and the vocabulary achievement of the control group and the experimental group were compared. Finally, to answer the study questions, means, standard deviations, and independent sample t-test were used utilizing SPSS.

## Results and Discussion

The current study addressed two questions: (a) "What is the impact of using TPR method on enhancing students' vocabulary learning?" and (b) "Are there statistically significant differences at ( $\alpha=0.05$ ) between the mean scores of students in the control group and the mean scores of students in the experimental group due to using TPR method?" To answer these questions, the independent sample T-test was used and the results are outlined in Table 1. As the table shows, there are no statistically significant differences at ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) level in the scores of students in the experimental group due to using the TPR method. The significant level is (0.298) which is more than (0.05). However, the mean scores of the experimental group (9.47) are less than the mean scores of the control group (10.07). Hence, these results revealed that using the TPR method had no positive impact on learners' vocabulary learning.

Table 1. Results of Independent Sample T-test using the TPR Method

	Group	No.	Mean	S. D.	t	Sig.*
Total	Control	33	10.07	4.168	0.534	0.298
	Experimental	33	9.47	4.531		

The data in Table 1 illustrates that using the TPR method within an experimental framework has no positive impact on learners' vocabulary learning, which might be attributed to several reasons: the limited duration of the application, students' reluctance to participate, the different learning styles of the participants, and the emergence of some kind of disciplinary problems. Some students felt embarrassed and reluctant to participate while others could not find equal participation opportunities. Moreover, the TPR method did not meet the learning styles of the whole class since most students were accustomed to memorizing the meaning of words in Arabic in lists. For example, the method was not the best for visual learners interested in observing things. It was also suitable for auditory learners who prefer listening rather than acting. In addition, applying the TPR method led to distraction among students. Furthermore, the span of the application was insufficient to help the students get used to this new method.

Taking these factors into consideration, the results are not in agreement with Lubis (2020) who found that learners' vocabulary was improved due to using the TPR method and Miskiyah and Amalia (2020) who pointed out that the TPR method made the learning of English vocabulary easier as students practiced them verbally and physically. The results also contradicted Coşar and Orhan's results (2019) who found that TPR was more effective, enjoyable, and motivating for kindergarten students in learning English vocabulary. This contradiction implies that using TPR with younger pupils yield better outcomes.

## Conclusion

The main objective of the current study was to examine the impact of the TPR method on enhancing 5th graders' vocabulary learning. Based on the findings, it suggests some tips

for teachers, learners, parents and curriculum designers to help students overcome the obstacles encountered during vocabulary learning. Parents are also expected to apply TPR while teaching their children. The main idea is to create a cheerful and joyful atmosphere, especially in teaching vocabulary, which, in turn, would attract their attention to learn better, facilitate their observation of vocabulary and hence their outcomes. The findings and the literature review add some insights to teaching vocabulary not only in the Palestinian context but also in some other similar learning situations. The study may enlighten the departments of curricula and supervision to hold specialized workshops for teachers, equipping them with different teaching methods reflecting on the post-method pedagogy that combines techniques to meet all students' learning styles and address the local learning needs. The curriculum designers could include appropriate and various activities and exercises in the EFL textbooks designed on the TPR and some other teaching principles. The study also provides implications for further researchers who may want to investigate the impact of TPR on other groups with different levels and skills or compare the impact of TPR on males and females in public and private schools.

#### Disclosure Statement:

We (the authors of this paper) hereby declare that research ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of this paper. Thus, we take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

**Conflict of interest:** We have no conflict of interest to declare.

**Funding:** None

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