

Exploring Total Physical Response (TPR) for Vocabulary Teaching in Primary Education: Evidence from Teachers in Hanoi, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the pedagogical value and practical implementation of Total Physical Response (TPR) in primary-level English vocabulary instruction by integrating theoretical perspectives with empirical evidence from a mixed-methods investigation of teachers' perceptions. Drawing on foundational work on TPR and recent research on embodied learning and teacher cognition, the study adopts a concurrent mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 15 primary school English teachers in Hanoi, Vietnam. Questionnaire results indicate consistently high ratings across domains, including perceived instructional benefits, teacher confidence, classroom dynamics, implementation challenges, and professional development needs, suggesting that TPR is viewed as both highly effective and operationally demanding. Qualitative findings further elaborate these patterns by identifying three key themes: the role of TPR in reducing learner anxiety and enabling low-pressure participation, its contribution to sustaining engagement and attention through structured movement, and the practical constraints associated with classroom management, space, time, and limited professional training. The integration of findings supports a context-sensitive interpretation of TPR as a high-value yet resource-intensive approach whose effectiveness depends on instructional design and implementation conditions. Based on these insights, the study proposes a structured TPR lesson sequence that progresses from comprehension to production and highlights the importance of aligning assessment practices with embodied learning processes. While the findings are limited by their reliance on teacher self-report data within a single context, they offer pedagogically grounded implications for primary language teaching and identify directions for future research, including the need for classroom observation and direct measures of learner outcomes.

Keywords: Total Physical Response (TPR); vocabulary instruction; primary education; embodied learning; teacher cognition

INTRODUCTION

TPR is widely recognized as a language teaching approach that facilitates comprehension through the integration of verbal input and physical action (Asher, 1966; Sumarni et al., 2022). By requiring learners to respond to spoken commands with bodily movement, TPR prioritizes meaning-focused processing and typically delays oral production until learners are developmentally ready. This approach has been particularly associated with reduced learner anxiety and increased engagement, making it especially relevant for young learners in early stages of language acquisition (Asher, 1966). Despite its longstanding presence in language pedagogy, however, the extent to which TPR is consistently and effectively implemented in classroom practice remains unclear.

One reason for this inconsistency lies in the role of teacher cognition. Research suggests that teaching methods are not applied as fixed or uniform procedures but are instead interpreted and adapted through teachers' beliefs, prior experiences, and the contextual realities of their classrooms (Borg, 2003). As a result, the effectiveness of TPR cannot be fully understood without considering how teachers perceive and enact it in practice. This perspective is particularly important in primary EFL contexts, where instructional decisions are shaped by factors such as learners' age, proficiency level, classroom management demands, and institutional expectations.

Recent research has renewed interest in TPR from both empirical and theoretical perspectives. On the one hand, synthesis studies indicate that TPR-informed instruction can support vocabulary acquisition, particularly among young learners, but also reveal considerable variability in learning outcomes (İnciman Çelik et al., 2021). This variability suggests that the impact of TPR is not uniform and may depend on how it is designed and implemented in specific contexts. On the other hand, developments in embodied approaches to language learning, particularly in the field of embodied cognition, have provided a stronger theoretical basis for action-based instruction. From this perspective, language learning is understood as grounded in sensorimotor experience, with physical engagement playing a key role in meaning construction (Jusslin et al., 2022). Vocabulary learning, especially at the beginner level, has been identified as particularly responsive to such approaches (Jusslin et al., 2022; Oppici et al., 2023).

Despite these advances, several important gaps remain in the literature. Much of the existing research has focused on measuring learning outcomes through experimental or quasi-experimental designs, while paying limited attention to how TPR is interpreted and implemented by teachers in real classroom settings. In addition, although embodied learning theory offers valuable conceptual insights, it does not always provide clear guidance for pedagogical practice. Furthermore, relatively few studies have examined TPR within specific educational contexts while simultaneously considering teachers' perspectives and classroom realities. These gaps highlight the need for context-sensitive research that moves beyond generalized claims of effectiveness.

In response to these limitations, the present study investigates teachers' perceptions of TPR in vocabulary instruction within a single private primary school in Hanoi, Vietnam. This context-specific focus enables an in-depth exploration of how TPR is understood and enacted in a particular institutional setting. At the same time, the study acknowledges that its findings are not intended to be broadly generalizable, but rather to offer insights that may be relevant to similar educational contexts.

More specifically, this study aims to contribute to the literature in two ways. First, it provides an empirical account of primary school teachers' perceptions of TPR, thereby foregrounding the practitioner perspective that is often underrepresented in research on instructional approaches. Second, it interprets these perceptions in relation to both theoretical frameworks and classroom realities in order to identify the perceived affordances and constraints of TPR. Based on these insights, the study offers pedagogically relevant implications for the design and implementation of TPR-based vocabulary instruction.

Importantly, this study does not seek to establish the effectiveness of TPR in definitive terms. Instead, it is positioned as a context-specific, perception-based investigation that explores how teachers conceptualize and utilize TPR in practice. By doing so, it seeks to develop a more nuanced understanding of how, why, and under what conditions TPR may be meaningfully applied in primary EFL classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical foundations of TPR

The theoretical and empirical foundations of TPR originate in the experimental work of James J. Asher, whose early studies demonstrated that synchronizing linguistic input with physical action can enhance listening comprehension and retention compared to more sedentary instructional approaches (Asher, 1965, 1966; Asher & Price, 1967). These foundational contributions established a comprehension-first orientation to language learning, grounded in the assumption that reducing learner anxiety facilitates more effective acquisition (Asher, 1966).

Subsequent methodological accounts have conceptualized TPR as an approach informed by memory trace theory, which posits that recall is strengthened through the integration of verbal and motor activity, as well as by analogies to first language acquisition processes (Liu, 2021). In addition, affective dimensions, particularly reduced stress and increased learner engagement, have consistently been highlighted as central to the pedagogical rationale of TPR (Asher, 1966). While these principles provide a strong theoretical basis, they also reflect assumptions that require re-examination in light of more recent developments in language learning theory.

TPR and embodied approaches to language learning

More recent scholarship has revisited TPR by situating it within broader theoretical developments, particularly in the field of embodied cognition. From this perspective, language learning is understood as inherently grounded in sensorimotor experience, with meaning constructed through the interaction between cognitive processes and physical action (Jusslin et al., 2022).

A comprehensive mixed-studies review synthesizing several decades of research suggests that embodied approaches can support learning by engaging cognitive, physical, and emotional dimensions simultaneously (Jusslin et al., 2022). This line of research identifies vocabulary instruction, especially at the beginner level, as particularly well suited to action-based and gesture-supported learning, thereby reinforcing the theoretical relevance of TPR in contemporary pedagogy.

However, the empirical evidence remains mixed. While some studies report positive effects of gesture and action on vocabulary acquisition, other findings indicate that active physical enactment does not consistently outperform passive observation across different assessment conditions (Oppici et al., 2023). In addition, methodological limitations, including small sample sizes and short intervention durations, raise questions about the robustness and generalizability of these findings (Oppici et al., 2023). These inconsistencies suggest that embodied approaches, including TPR, are highly dependent on how they are implemented in specific instructional contexts.

Empirical evidence on TPR effectiveness in vocabulary instruction

Within TPR-specific research, synthesis studies adopting both quantitative and qualitative approaches generally report a positive overall effect on vocabulary learning outcomes (İnciman Çelik et al., 2021). At the same time, these studies emphasize considerable variability in results, highlighting the influence of factors such as learner age, proficiency level, instructional duration, and the design of classroom activities (İnciman Çelik et al., 2021). This variability indicates that TPR effectiveness cannot be assumed to be universal, but must be understood in relation to contextual and pedagogical conditions.

Empirical research in the Vietnamese primary education context provides further insights into classroom applications of TPR. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies have shown that learners exposed to TPR-based instruction tend to outperform those receiving more conventional instruction in vocabulary acquisition, including meaning, pronunciation, and usage (Nguyen et al., 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). Some studies incorporating delayed post-tests suggest that TPR may also support longer-term retention (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024).

In addition to cognitive outcomes, affective dimensions have been examined, with findings indicating that TPR can reduce learner anxiety and increase confidence in language use (Xie, 2021). However, these studies also highlight limitations, including differences in learner responsiveness, reduced suitability for higher proficiency levels, and practical constraints related to time and classroom management (Nguyen et al., 2021). These findings reinforce the need to interpret TPR effectiveness cautiously and in relation to specific teaching contexts.

Research gaps and the role of teacher cognition

Despite the substantial body of research supporting the pedagogical potential of TPR, several important gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature focuses on learning outcomes, often using controlled or quasi-experimental designs, while paying limited attention to how teachers interpret and implement TPR in everyday classroom practice.

Second, although embodied learning theory provides a strong conceptual foundation, its pedagogical implications are not always clearly translated into practical classroom strategies (Jusslin et al., 2022). Third, the role of teacher cognition, particularly teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and context-sensitive decision-making, remains underexplored in relation to TPR implementation.

These gaps highlight the need for research that integrates theoretical insights from embodied learning with empirical investigations of teachers' perspectives in specific educational contexts. By examining how teachers perceive, adapt, and enact TPR, such research can contribute to a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of its pedagogical value. Accordingly, the present study shifts the focus from evaluating whether TPR is effective to exploring how and under what conditions it can be meaningfully implemented in real-world primary EFL classrooms.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design and rationale

This study adopted a concurrent mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same phase, analyzed independently, and subsequently integrated. This convergent design facilitates the triangulation of findings by enabling comparison, corroboration, and elaboration across data sources (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Such an approach is particularly suitable for examining both the breadth of teachers' reported perceptions and the depth of their contextualized experiences.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative strands was intended to enhance interpretive validity. Specifically, quantitative data provided an overview of general trends in teachers' perceptions of TPR, while qualitative data offered explanatory insights into the underlying reasons for these perceptions. However, it is important to note that the study relies primarily on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias. As such, the findings should be interpreted as reflective of teachers' perceptions rather than as direct evidence of instructional effectiveness.

Research context and participants

The study was conducted within a private primary school English program in Hanoi, Vietnam. The selection of this site was based on accessibility and the presence of an established English language program in which TPR was reported to be used as part of vocabulary instruction. While this context allows for an in-depth examination of pedagogical practices within a specific institutional setting, it also limits the generalizability of the findings.

The participant group consisted of 15 English language teachers who completed the questionnaire, of whom six participated in the qualitative interview phase. The relatively small and localized sample reflects the exploratory and context-specific nature of the study. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with caution and are not intended to represent broader populations of EFL teachers.

Due to limitations in the available dataset, detailed information regarding student demographics, including age range, grade level, and class size, was not systematically collected. Therefore, the analytical focus of the study is confined to teachers' perceptions and reported practices rather than empirically measured student outcomes. References to learner characteristics are framed in general terms, consistent with typical primary education contexts, which usually include learners aged approximately 5 to 12 years.

Instruments and data collection

The quantitative component employed a structured questionnaire designed to capture teachers' perceptions of TPR in vocabulary instruction. The instrument was organized into key thematic domains, including perceived instructional benefits, teacher confidence, classroom dynamics, implementation challenges, and professional development and reflection. Responses were collected using a five-point Likert scale, allowing participants to indicate varying degrees of agreement.

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using internal consistency measures, with Cronbach's alpha indicating an acceptable level of reliability. However, as the instrument relies on self-reported responses, it may be influenced by factors such as social desirability or individual interpretation of questionnaire items.

The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews aimed at eliciting in-depth accounts of teachers' experiences with TPR. This format allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' perspectives while

maintaining a degree of consistency across interviews. The interview protocol focused on areas such as perceived effectiveness, instructional strategies, and contextual constraints.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, to identify patterns in teachers' responses. These analyses provided a general overview of how TPR was perceived across different dimensions of classroom practice.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which enabled the identification of recurring patterns and themes related to teachers' beliefs, pedagogical reasoning, and contextual challenges. This approach is consistent with research on teacher cognition, which emphasizes the role of beliefs and decision-making processes in shaping instructional practices (Borg, 2003). To enhance transparency and credibility, representative excerpts from interview data were included to illustrate key themes.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was conducted at the interpretation stage, where results from both strands were compared and synthesized. This process allowed for the identification of convergences and divergences between reported trends and individual experiences, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Research ethics

Participation in the study was voluntary and based on informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured through the use of coded identifiers, and all data were used solely for research purposes in accordance with established ethical guidelines for educational research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative findings from teacher questionnaire

The quantitative findings indicate that teachers report highly positive perceptions of the use of TPR in vocabulary instruction. As presented in Table 1, all measured constructs received mean scores above 4.4 on a five-point Likert scale, suggesting strong agreement across multiple pedagogical dimensions.

Table 1: Teachers' perception of the use of TPR in vocabulary instruction

No.	Constructs	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	Interpretation
1	Perceived benefits	4.48	0.51	Very positive
2	Teacher confidence	4.60	0.49	Very high
3	Impact on classroom dynamics	4.51	0.53	Very positive
4	Professional training needs	4.53	0.50	High

Teachers reported strong agreement regarding the perceived benefits of TPR ($M = 4.48$), particularly in enhancing vocabulary comprehension and retention. Similarly, the high mean score for classroom dynamics ($M = 4.51$) indicates that teachers perceive TPR as supportive of learner engagement and participation. Teacher confidence received the highest rating ($M = 4.60$), suggesting a strong sense of self-efficacy in implementing the method. At the same time, the relatively high score for professional training needs ($M = 4.53$) reflects an awareness of the complexity involved in effectively applying TPR in classroom settings.

It is important to note that these findings represent teachers' perceptions rather than direct measures of instructional effectiveness. As such, they should be interpreted cautiously, particularly given the reliance on self-reported data.

Qualitative findings from teacher interviews

The qualitative findings provide deeper insights into how teachers interpret and enact TPR in classroom practice. Three main themes emerged, reflecting key aspects of teacher cognition as conceptualized by Borg (2003).

First, teachers emphasized the role of TPR in facilitating low-pressure participation. The opportunity for learners to respond physically before producing language was perceived as reducing anxiety and encouraging broader classroom involvement. This perception aligns with the comprehension-first principle underlying TPR (Asher, 1966).

Second, teachers highlighted the effectiveness of TPR in sustaining learner engagement and attention. Structured movement and command-based interaction were described as increasing students' willingness to participate and helping maintain focus throughout lessons. These observations are consistent with research on embodied learning, which suggests that physical engagement can support both cognitive and affective aspects of learning (Jusslin et al., 2022).

Third, participants identified several implementation challenges. These included managing high-energy classroom behavior, limited physical space, and time constraints that affect lesson pacing. In addition, teachers reported a need for further professional training, particularly in transitioning from action-based activities to more formal language use. These findings suggest that the successful implementation of TPR depends not only on its theoretical principles but also on contextual and practical considerations.

DISCUSSION

The findings from both quantitative and qualitative data point to a consistent pattern. Teachers perceive TPR as an effective and engaging instructional approach, particularly for vocabulary learning in primary classrooms. At the same time, these perceptions are accompanied by an awareness of the practical challenges associated with its implementation.

This pattern is consistent with previous synthesis research, which reports generally positive effects of TPR alongside considerable variability in outcomes depending on contextual and instructional factors (İnciman Çelik et al., 2021). The strong emphasis on learner engagement and reduced anxiety observed in this study also aligns with theoretical perspectives from embodied learning, which highlight the role of physical interaction in supporting meaning-making processes (Jusslin et al., 2022).

However, the findings also reflect tensions identified in the broader literature. While teachers perceive TPR as effective, empirical studies have shown that action-based approaches do not always produce significantly stronger outcomes than alternative methods across all contexts (Oppici et al., 2023). This suggests that perceived effectiveness may be influenced not only by learning outcomes but also by observable classroom dynamics, such as increased participation and engagement.

Importantly, the study highlights the role of teacher cognition in mediating instructional practices. Teachers' beliefs about the value of TPR appear to shape how it is implemented, adapted, and evaluated in the classroom. At the same time, contextual constraints, including time, space, and institutional support, influence the extent to which TPR can be effectively applied. This supports the argument that teaching methods cannot be understood independently of the contexts in which they are enacted (Borg, 2003).

Given these considerations, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific and perception-based rather than as definitive evidence of TPR effectiveness. They provide insight into how teachers understand and use TPR, rather than establishing causal relationships between the method and learning outcomes.

Pedagogical implications for primary classrooms

The findings suggest that TPR is most effective when implemented as a structured instructional sequence rather than as isolated activities. Its pedagogical value lies in the progression from comprehension to production, supported by systematic scaffolding (Asher, 1966; Sumarni et al., 2022).

A typical TPR lesson may begin with teacher modeling to establish comprehensible input, followed by whole-class physical responses that encourage participation without performance pressure. Activities can then be extended to pair or group work to accommodate learner variation. At a later stage, learners may take a more active role by producing commands, which supports language use. The sequence can be concluded with a transition to literacy through short written or visual reinforcement tasks.

In practice, activities such as sequential command chains, interactive games, and action-based storytelling can be used to operationalize TPR. These formats support repetition, maintain engagement, and allow for gradual increases in complexity. In contexts with limited space or logistical constraints, TPR can be adapted through smaller-scale gestures or demonstration-based techniques. Such adaptations maintain key elements of embodied learning while ensuring classroom feasibility (Oppici et al., 2023).

Assessment methods aligned with TPR

Assessment presents a challenge in TPR-based instruction, as movement-based learning does not always align with traditional evaluation formats. A more appropriate approach is to align assessment with the instructional principles of TPR by combining performance-based and formal measures.

Formative assessment can be integrated into classroom activities through observation, individual response checks, and peer interaction tasks. These strategies allow teachers to monitor comprehension without interrupting the flow of instruction, consistent with the emphasis on observable action as evidence of learning (Asher, 1966).

For summative assessment, short test formats such as matching or multiple-choice items can be used alongside delayed post-tests to evaluate retention over time. Delayed assessment is particularly important in the context of TPR, as it provides a more reliable indication of long-term vocabulary acquisition (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study integrates foundational and contemporary perspectives on TPR with empirical insights from a mixed-methods investigation of teachers' perceptions in a primary EFL context. The findings suggest that TPR is perceived by teachers as an embodied, comprehension-oriented approach that can support vocabulary learning through the integration of speech and physical action (Asher, 1966; Jusslin et al., 2022). Teachers reported a range of perceived pedagogical benefits, including increased learner engagement, attention, and confidence. At the same time, they identified practical challenges related to classroom space, time constraints, assessment alignment, and the need for further professional training. This combination of perceived strengths and constraints is consistent with prior research indicating that the effectiveness of TPR depends on contextual and instructional factors rather than the method itself (İnciman Çelik et al., 2021).

However, these findings should be interpreted with caution. The study is based on self-reported data from a small sample of teachers within a single private primary school in Hanoi, and does not include classroom observation or direct measures of student learning outcomes. As such, the results reflect teachers' perceptions and reported practices rather than providing conclusive evidence of instructional effectiveness. The context-specific nature of the study also limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other educational settings.

Despite these limitations, the study offers several practical implications for similar primary EFL contexts. The findings suggest that TPR may be most productively implemented when structured as a coherent instructional sequence that supports progression from comprehension to production. Effective use of TPR also appears to

depend on clear classroom management strategies and the alignment of instructional activities with appropriate assessment methods (Sumarni et al., 2022). In particular, combining performance-based classroom observation with concise formal assessment formats and delayed retention checks may provide a more balanced approach to evaluating vocabulary learning. In addition, targeted professional development may support teachers in adapting TPR to diverse classroom conditions and in integrating action-based activities with more formal language use.

Future research is needed to build on these findings by incorporating multiple data sources, including classroom observations and student performance measures, in order to provide a more comprehensive account of TPR implementation and its outcomes. Expanding the scope of investigation to include multiple schools and varied educational contexts would also enhance the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, examining longer-term effects on vocabulary retention and exploring affective dimensions such as learner engagement and anxiety may contribute to a deeper understanding of how embodied approaches function in language education.

Overall, this study positions TPR not as a universally effective method, but as a context-dependent pedagogical approach whose value lies in how it is interpreted and enacted by teachers within specific classroom environments.

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