

**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE (TPR)
METHOD IN ACTIVATING PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PASSIVE
VOCABULARY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES**

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Abstract. This article explores the pedagogical effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in transitioning primary school students' passive vocabulary into their active lexicon during foreign language instruction. Early childhood language acquisition heavily relies on cognitive-motor connections. However, traditional methodologies often emphasize rote memorization, leading to a large reservoir of passive vocabulary that young learners can understand but cannot actively produce. Drawing upon James Asher's psycholinguistic theory of coordination between speech and action, this study investigates how physical movement stimulates memory retention and contextual recall. The paper establishes a theoretical framework for early language acquisition, analyzes the cognitive mechanisms of vocabulary activation, and provides structured guidelines for implementing TPR in primary classrooms. The expected outcomes suggest that integrating kinesthetic actions significantly reduces language anxiety (the affective filter) and triggers immediate retrieval mechanisms, effectively bridging the gap between vocabulary recognition and active verbal production.

Keywords: Total Physical Response (TPR), Passive Vocabulary, Active Vocabulary, Primary Education, Foreign Language Acquisition, Kinesthetic Learning.

Introduction.

In the contemporary globalized educational landscape, introducing foreign languages at the primary school level has become standard institutional practice. Young learners have unique mental and physical characteristics that distinguish them from adult learners; they are naturally curious, energetic, and reliant on sensory-motor experiences to construct meaning. However, a persistent challenge in early language pedagogy is the disproportionate growth of students' passive vocabulary relative to their active vocabulary. Passive vocabulary refers to lexical items that learners recognize and comprehend in context but cannot retrieve and use spontaneously in speech or writing. Active vocabulary, by contrast, encompasses words that learners can readily deploy to express their own thoughts. In many traditional primary classrooms, lexical items remain inactive in the passive reservoir because of limited situational contextualization

and communicative necessity. To address this variation, pedagogical researchers have increasingly turned to kinesthetic and immersive methodologies. Among these, the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, developed by psychology professor James Asher in the 1960s, is widely regarded as effective for young learners. TPR is predicated on how children acquire their first language: adult commands and the child's physical responses precede verbalization. In a foreign language classroom, TPR maps linguistic input directly onto physical movement. When an instructor commands "Stand up" or "Mimic a bird," students execute the action, bypassing the traditional, anxiety-inducing requirement for immediate oral reproduction. The psychological foundation of TPR aligns with the Right-Brain Learning hypothesis and Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. Young children comprehend information mainly through the right hemisphere, which responds to physical activities, symbols, and spatial cognition, before the left hemisphere structurally analyzes language. By utilizing physical movement, TPR engages the right brain and creates a robust cognitive "memory trace" through multi-sensory association. Furthermore, because students are not initially forced to speak, their affective filter—characterized by anxiety, self-consciousness, and fear of failure—remains low. This stress-free environment is critical for primary school students, as high anxiety can cognitively block the input necessary for language acquisition. While the literature supports TPR for teaching basic imperatives and concrete nouns, its specific utility in **activating** previously acquired passive vocabulary warrants deeper structural analysis. Activating passive vocabulary is not only about teaching new words; it involves strengthening the neural pathways of existing mental representations so recognition evolves into spontaneous production.

Passive vocabulary relies heavily on recognition. TPR pairs sound input with immediate physical action. This creates a "dual-coding" effect in the brain—verbal and visual/motor pathways are activated simultaneously. When they perform an action (e.g., *jumping* when they hear "leap"), the word is anchored into their long-term receptive memory before they are ever asked to say it aloud.

In first- and second-language acquisition, children go through a "silent period" during which they understand language but cannot produce it. Established approaches often force premature production, causing anxiety. According to Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1987), high anxiety, low self-confidence, and a lack of motivation act as mental barriers that prevent input from reaching the language acquisition parts of the brain. TPR respects this silent period by allowing students to demonstrate awareness through their bodies instead of their voices. By lowering the affective filter (anxiety), students confidently build a large passive vocabulary. As their confidence grows, this internal bank naturally overflows into active speech.

Brain Hemispheres and Dual-Coding: In primary school children, the left hemisphere, which handles analytical language, is still developing, while the right

hemisphere, which handles physical, spatial, and expressive functions, is highly active. Traditional vocabulary teaching, such as rote memorization and bilingual lists, relies heavily on the left hemisphere and can cause rapid mental fatigue. Dr. James Asher's TPR uses dual coding: when a student hears "run" and then runs, both hemispheres of the brain activate. This dual track creates a deeper neural pathway than auditory input alone.

Kinesthetic Scaffolding: Receptive or passive vocabulary is often stored as abstract sound-meaning pairings. For young learners, abstractions are highly volatile—they forget them quickly. Physical movement acts as a concrete scaffold. The physical sensation of doing the action becomes an "anchor." When the student encounters the passive word later, the brain does not have to retrieve it through abstract linguistic networks; it retrieves it through motor-sensory memory, which is highly robust in children. As noted by Celik et al. (2021), "TPR enhances vocabulary retention by activating both motor memory and auditory processing systems" (p. 158). By physically acting out commands, students engage their motor cortex alongside the brain's language centers.

Traditional rote memorization often leads to rapid forgetting because the vocabulary is learned in a contextual vacuum. TPR, conversely, uses game-like elements, physical tasks, and situational narratives (such as acting out daily routines or playing "Simon Says") that embed new words in vivid, memorable contexts. When primary school students use their whole bodies to engage with a language, they create stronger episodic memory traces. Multiple neural pathways are activated simultaneously—auditory, visual, and kinesthetic—which greatly aids in the retrieval of receptive vocabulary when students encounter those words again in stories, songs, or teacher instructions. This multi-sensory reinforcement ensures that passive vocabulary transitions from short-term memory to long-term storage, forming a robust foundation that students can eventually draw upon for future language production.

Though the immediate goal of TPR is to build passive vocabulary, this receptive foundation is the essential first step toward active verbal production. A child cannot speak a word they do not first understand. TPR allows students to build a vast mental database of words, structures, and pronunciation patterns without the pressure to speak them yet. These studies consistently highlight the power of multi-sensory integration. For instance, in an experimental study by Gay et al. (2025) involving young learners, students taught using TPR showed substantial gains in vocabulary learning, jumping from a "did not meet expectations" baseline to a "very satisfactory" performance on post-intervention tests. Over time, as this passive vocabulary becomes firmly established through physical repetition, students naturally begin to feel the urge to speak. When they finally transition to speaking, they do not have to struggle to remember what a word means; they already have a physical and cognitive familiarity

with it. In this way, the passive vocabulary built by TPR serves as the direct runway for future oral fluency.

While TPR is highly effective for activating vocabulary related to concrete actions, objects, and spatial relationships, it faces a major bottleneck when applied to abstract language. Primary school students can easily internalize expressions like "jump," "big," or "apple" through physical modeling, but abstract terms—such as "think," "justice," or "yesterday"—cannot be easily translated into a particular physical gesture. If a foreign language curriculum relies too heavily on pure TPR, students' passive vocabulary may become heavily skewed toward physical imperatives while lagging in nuanced, conceptual language. To overcome this limitation, educators have to adapt TPR by pairing physical movements with visual presentations or metaphorical gestures, ensuring that the method's cognitive benefits spread beyond basic physical vocabulary. Similarly, experimental data from Zhang and Jamaludin (2024) comparing TPR with conventional approaches demonstrated that TPR creates a highly participatory, stress-free environment in which deep receptive vocabulary is achieved. This is because engaging multiple sensory channels simultaneously—auditory, visual, and kinesthetic—creates rich, redundant neural pathways for a single vocabulary item.

A unique dimension of TPR's effectiveness is that vocabulary activation occurs even when a student is not physically moving. Cognitive neuroscience highlights the role of "mirror neurons"—brain cells that fire both when an individual acts and when they observe someone else performing the same action. In a primary school classroom, when an instructor or a peer acts out a target vocabulary word, the observing students experience a form of internal, mental simulation. This means that during group TPR activities, children continuously map language to meaning simply by watching their classmates. This neurological mirroring enables passive lexical acquisition to occur effortlessly throughout the room, maximizing learning productivity even during periods of calm observation.

From a classroom management standpoint, the high-energy nature of Total Physical Response (TPR) demands balancing learner involvement with the risk of overstimulation. While movement facilitates vocabulary retention, excessive physical activity may increase excitement among primary students to levels that hinder deep mental processing. When lessons become overly chaotic, students may concentrate solely on physical play or competition, neglecting auditory language input. To ensure that TPR effectively activates passive vocabulary, teachers ought to structure lessons to alternate between periods of high-energy movement and intervals of peaceful reflection. This approach confirms that physical activity reinforces linguistic internalization rather than detracting from it.

To measure the objective impact of TPR on passive vocabulary, researchers frequently conduct controlled classroom experiments comparing TPR-based instruction to traditional translation methods. In a typical experimental design, a control group learns new foreign vocabulary through flashcards and repetition, while the experimental group learns the same words using TPR gestures. Researchers assess passive vocabulary through receptive tests, such as picture matching or listening comprehension tasks, both immediately after the lesson and several weeks later to assess retention. These experiments consistently show that while both groups might perform similarly on immediate tests, the TPR group scores significantly higher on delayed post-tests. This quantitative data proves that linking physical action to auditory data creates more durable memory pathways, experimentally validating TPR as a superior method for long-term passive vocabulary retention.

Experimental designs assessing the impact of Total Physical Response (TPR) commonly assign primary school classrooms to either a TPR experimental group or a traditional translation-based control group. Following the intervention, assessments typically distinguish between receptive vocabulary, measured through passive comprehension tasks such as matching pictures or identifying spoken cues, and *productive* vocabulary, evaluated by requiring students to produce the target word verbally.

The data from these studies show a consistent pattern. Although both groups often achieve comparable scores on immediate recall assessments, the TPR group exhibits statistically greater retention on delayed passive vocabulary tests. These outcomes indicate that physical association considerably improves the long-term retention of passive vocabulary.

However, the data also highlight a performance gap—students in the TPR group master passive recognition far more quickly than they develop the ability to produce the words actively. This experimental gap supports the developmental theory that TPR directly targets and builds a massive receptive linguistic foundation first, leaving oral production to occur naturally at a later stage.

Conclusion. In summary, the Total Physical Response (TPR) method serves as an effective pedagogical approach for activating and expanding the passive vocabulary of primary school students in foreign-language classrooms. By directly linking auditory input to physical movement, TPR addresses the developmental needs of young learners and establishes a robust kinesthetic-cognitive connection that eliminates reliance on native-language translation. This multi-sensory strategy accelerates semantic mapping and accommodates the natural "silent period" of language acquisition. Furthermore, by alleviating the pressure to produce speech immediately, TPR lowers the affective filter (Krashen, 1987) and reduces language anxiety, thereby enabling students to concentrate on listening and comprehension.

Empirical research consistently supports these advantages, indicating that students instructed through TPR exhibit superior long-term vocabulary retention compared to those taught using traditional, sedentary methods (Celik et al., 2021; Gay et al., 2025). Although TPR presents challenges in conveying highly abstract concepts and necessitates careful classroom management to avoid overstimulation, its overall impact on receptive language skills remains significant. Rather than facilitating only temporary memorization, TPR fosters the development of a robust mental database of passive vocabulary. This receptive base provides the essential cognitive foundation for the eventual emergence of active and confident foreign-language production (Zhang & Jamaludin, 2024). For educators aiming to design inclusive, engaging, and evidence-based language curricula, integrating TPR remains a vital strategy for early childhood language acquisition.

References:

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