

Survey of the Application of Total Physical Response (TPR) Method: Implications for Teaching and Learning of English Language

 **Owoicho Onu**

Department Of English, Fct College Of Education Zuba, Abuja

Corresponding Author: owoichoonui8@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70382/hujissshr.v9i6.013>

Keywords: Total Physical Response, English language teaching, primary education, teaching effectiveness, instructional strategies, FCT Abuja.

Abstract

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a language teaching method that integrates physical movement with verbal input to enhance language acquisition. Based on these premises, this study surveyed the application of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method: implications for teaching and learning of English language in primary schools in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. A stratified random sampling techniques was used to select 300 English language teachers from public and private primary schools in FCT Abuja. Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire structured on a 4-point Likert scale and validated by experts. Reliability was established through a pilot test, yielding a coefficient of 0.78. The data analysis employed frequency counts, means and standard deviations. Findings revealed that TPR is being applied to a moderate-to-high extent particularly in encouraging pupils to respond physically to instructions. Teachers perceived TPR as highly effective in improving pupils' ability to follow instructions, enhancing listening skills, accelerating vocabulary acquisition, and boosting speaking confidence. Attitudes towards TPR were generally positive, with many teachers enjoying its use and recommending it to colleagues. However, challenges such as large class sizes, lack of

training, limited teaching materials, pupils' low English proficiency and time constraints hindered optimal implementation. Thus, the study concludes that TPR is a valuable pedagogical tool for English language instruction in primary schools, but its potential has not been fully maximised. It recommends institutional adoption, teacher training, class size management, provision of resources and adequate lesson time to enhance effective TPR integration.

Introduction

Total Physical Response (TPR) which was developed by Dr. James J. Asher in the 1970s is a language teaching method that integrates physical movement with verbal input to facilitate language learning. One reason is that this approach emphasizes using physical movement to help pupils respond to verbal input in the target language without translating it into their native language. According to James in Eze, (2019) TPR is believed to be an effective and interesting method of language learning especially in the early childhood. Thus, the teaching and learning process incorporates "songs, games and stories paired with actions which capture the interest of young active learners" (Suhendan, 2013). This method aligns well with the cognitive development of young children as it relies on physical responses. TPR also has a certain positive influence on teaching of most EFL teachers in the primary school. English teachers of primary school, should be required to learn more about TPR, because their pupils are so young that they are easily attracted by physical actions and are eager to respond by using physical actions (Khairma & Suryana, 2018).

In the context of Nigeria, English functions as the official language and is the primary medium of instruction across educational levels (Federal Ministry of Education, 2014). Many primary school children particularly in rural and semi-urban settlements enter the education system with limited exposure to English as indigenous languages dominate their home environments. This linguistic disparity poses significant challenges in comprehension and engagement when English is introduced in the classroom (Tunde-Awe, 2014). Traditional teaching methodologies in Nigeria often emphasize rote memorization and passive learning which may not effectively address the needs of young learners transitioning to English-medium instruction (Fakeye, 2017). In contrast, TPR offers a dynamic alternative by incorporating physical actions into language instruction. For instance, teachers might issue commands such as "stand up" or "sit down," to which pupils respond with corresponding physical movements. This method not only makes learning more interactive and enjoyable but also aids in the internalization of language concepts through physical association (Ogunnaike & Odunaike, 2015).

Research by Li, (2018) supports the efficacy of TPR in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and comprehension among young learners. A study by Richards & Rodgers, (2013) that analyzed the use of Total Physical Response (TPR) in primary schools found that it effectively develops vocabularies, comprehension, and basic communication skills, making it particularly beneficial for children who may struggle with concentration and engagement in traditional classroom settings. TPR connect extensively with Nigeria's rich oral traditions where storytelling songs and physical expression are integral to cultural transmission (Okoh, 2015; Yusuf, 2016). By integrating TPR, teachers can build upon these cultural practices by making English language learning more relatable and effective. For example, incorporating local stories and songs into TPR activities can facilitate a smoother transition for children from their native languages to English (Ogunleye, 2014). The successful implementation of TPR requires adequate teacher training and resources. Educators need to be proficient in TPR techniques and capable of integrating them effectively into their lesson plans.

Problem Statement

The teaching and learning of English language in primary schools across Nigeria particularly in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja face several challenges that hinder effective communication and proficiency. Despite being the country's official language and a critical tool for accessing global opportunities, English language education in primary schools is often characterized by rote learning, teacher-centered methods and a lack of innovative teaching strategies. These traditional approaches fail to address the diverse learning needs of young pupils and often result in low engagement, poor retention and limited language acquisition. Based on these observations, the researcher critically evaluates one promising strategy that has gained attention in language education which is Total Physical Response (TPR), a teaching method that integrates physical movement with verbal input to enhance comprehension and retention particularly among younger learners. TPR is grounded in the idea that children learn languages more effectively when activities engage both their minds and bodies. This approach is especially relevant in primary schools where children are naturally active and responsive to kinesthetic learning. However, there is a gap in the application and evaluation of TPR in primary schools in Abuja. Despite its potential benefits, which includes; improved vocabulary acquisition, better listening skill, and increased motivation, its adoption in Nigerian classrooms remains limited. Many teachers lack the training, resources or awareness needed to implement TPR effectively. Also, there is little empirical evidence on the extent to which TPR has been embraced, its impact on pupils' language learning outcomes and the challenges associated with its use. This study addressed these gaps by exploring the application of

Total Physical Response in teaching and learning English language in primary schools in the FCT.

Justification of the Study

TPR is a method known for engaging young learners through physical activities which make language learning enjoyable and memorable. Despite its potential, the implementation of TPR in primary schools in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja remains underexplored. This study is justified for several reasons because it aims to address language proficiency challenges, innovative teaching strategies, policy and curriculum development, teacher professional development and also contribute to literature. Understanding how TPR can improve language acquisition is essential for addressing these challenges. Traditional teaching methods in Nigerian primary schools are often teacher-centered and fail to meet the dynamic needs of young learners. This study looked at the practicality and effectiveness of an alternative approach. The findings would guide policymakers and curriculum developers in integrating innovative methods like TPR into primary education frameworks. Identifying gaps in teachers' knowledge and training for TPR will help in designing targeted professional development programmes. The study has enriched the body of knowledge on language teaching methodologies particularly in African contexts, where limited research exists on TPR.

Objective of the Study

This study aimed to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the extent to which Total Physical Response is used in teaching English language in primary schools in the FCT, Abuja.
2. To assess the effectiveness of TPR in improving pupils' English language skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing.
3. To identify teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of TPR in teaching English.
4. To explore the challenges faced by teachers and pupils in implementing TPR in English language classes.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. To what extent is Total Physical Response applied in teaching English language in primary schools in the FCT, Abuja?
2. How effective is Total Physical Response in improving pupils' English language skills?

3. What are the perceptions and attitudes of teachers towards the use of TPR in teaching English?
4. What challenges do teachers and pupils face in implementing TPR in English language lessons?

Literature Review

TPR or Total Physical Response is a teaching method inspired by the way infants acquire their first language as described by Huo (2014). As developed by psychologist James Asher, TPR emphasizes listening before speaking and combines physical movement with verbal input to enhance language learning. This method deliberately integrates listening and speaking activities to help pupils learn more effectively. Huo (2014) identified three key characteristics of TPR that offer clearer guidance for primary school English teachers in China. First, TPR prioritizes rapid comprehension of the target language as a whole, rather than focusing on individual words. Second, it supports long-term retention of knowledge, making it particularly suitable for children as it mimics the natural process of language acquisition, listening and responding physically to commands. Third, TPR incorporates engaging elements such as flashcards, games and group activities, which align physical responses with cognitive processing. These features make learning the target language both enjoyable and comprehensible.

TPR is grounded in the coordination of speech and action that emphasizes comprehension before production. In this method, instructors issue commands in the target language and pupils respond with corresponding physical actions (Widodo, 2015). This technique utilises the natural link between language and movement that facilitates better retention and understanding. By engaging multiple senses, TPR caters to various learning styles, making it especially beneficial for young learners who thrive on physical activity and direct engagement (EF Teacher Zone, 2017). According to Zulpan (2018) described TPR as a method where learners respond physically to commands given by the teacher who incorporates physical (motor) activities into language instruction. This approach emphasizes proper comprehension particularly in reading procedural texts. TPR is designed to connect actions with movement and enhance the learning experience. Scholars like Song (2016) shared similar views of the significance of TPR in English learning, describing it as an activity-centered approach that incorporates fun and playfulness. This method emphasizes the importance of active participation in primary school English classrooms where young learners engage in enjoyable games and various activities, responding to their teachers through actions or gestures. In contrast, when other teaching methods are used, young learners may require additional time to process and translate their understanding before responding

verbally or in writing.

Implementing Total Physical Response (TPR) in primary school English language instruction involves adopting strategies that integrate physical activity into learning. One key approach is the use of imperative commands. Teachers give simple directives such as "stand up," "sit down," or "open your book," which pupils then carry out physically. This approach creates a direct link between language and action, enhancing comprehension and memory retention. Another effective strategy is storytelling with actions often referred to as TPR Storytelling (TPRS). In this method, teachers narrate stories while pupils act out the events described. This technique not only makes learning more engaging but also contextualizes vocabulary and grammar that help pupils understand and internalize language concepts in meaningful ways. Interactive activities which include games and songs that require physical responses to verbal cues are also instrumental in reinforcing language learning. These activities are enjoyable and foster increased motivation and participation among students, creating a lively and effective learning environment (Li, 2018; Khairma & Suryana, 2018).

Research by Yang, (2014) and Ummah, (2017) indicates that TPR can significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition and listening skills among young learners. By reducing the stress associated with language learning, TPR creates a supportive environment where pupils feel comfortable to participate and make mistakes which is crucial for effective learning. The method's emphasis is on comprehension before production, this aligns with natural language acquisition processes that allow pupils to develop a solid understanding before attempting to speak. Despite its many benefits, the implementation of Total Physical Response (TPR) in primary school English language instruction is not without challenges. One significant obstacle is teacher training. For TPR to be effective, teachers must be well-versed in the method and capable of integrating physical activities meaningfully into their lessons. Without adequate training, educators may only struggle to utilize TPR, thereby, limiting its potential impact on student learning (Zuhdi & Mintohari, 2019).

Classroom management also presents a challenge particularly in larger classes. Coordinating physical activities among numerous pupils can be difficult and may result in disruptions if not managed carefully. Ensuring that activities remain organized and conducive to learning requires skill and experience on the part of the teacher (Zulpan, 2018). Also, curriculum constraints can hinder the widespread use of TPR. Standardized curricula often leave little room for flexibility, making it difficult for teachers to incorporate TPR activities consistently. This rigidity can restrict the opportunities for children to benefit from the interactive and engaging nature of TPR-based instruction. Addressing these challenges is essential to fully harness the potential of TPR in language education (Wikipedia Contributors, 2023). In the context of primary schools

in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja, Nigeria, the application of TPR presents both opportunities and challenges. Given the multilingual environment, TPR can serve as an effective tool for bridging language gaps and enhancing English language proficiency. However, factors such as limited resources, large class sizes, and insufficient teacher training may hinder its widespread adoption. Addressing these challenges through targeted professional development and curriculum adjustments could facilitate the effective integration of TPR in English language instruction.

Research Methodology

The study adopted descriptive survey design. This design was appropriate to the study because data had to be collected from a cross section of population and described its characteristics in a systematic manner. The research was carried out in six Area Councils of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja. The population of this study consisted of 1,500 teachers of English language of primary 1-4 in public and private primary schools. The Choice of this level of education was based on the fact that PTR is expected to be used frequently in English language instructions. The study employed stratified random technique to select 300 teachers. The reason for this decision is based on Boll and Gall (1971) in Inyiagu (2013) suggested that 20% should be used to draw sample from a population of up to 1,000, 10%, for a population of up to 5,000 and 5% for a population up to 10,000. Data were collected through questionnaire constructed by the researcher. The self developed questionnaire known as questionnaire for assessing Total Physical Response (TPR) was structured on the 4-point psychometric scale of Strongly agree (SA), Agree (A), Strongly Disagree (SD) and Strongly Disagree respectively.

The instrument was validated by the two experts from Department of English, FCT COE Zuba and Faculty of Education, University of Abuja to check the clarity of expression and relevance of the sub-constructs to teaching and the objectives they were meant to address including all the variables under study. A pilot study was carried out to calculate the reliability of the research questions. The QUATPR was trial-tested on 15 English teachers whom were not part of the sampled population. After collection, the result was subjected to item analysis and it yield reliability coefficient of 0.78 which was considered appropriate. The researcher with the help of assistants administered and collected the questionnaire (QUATPR) from the respondents. In administering the first instrument, the respondents were given copies of the questionnaire to fill and retrieve either immediately or within one week. Quantitative data from the questionnaires was analysed using statistical methods of frequency, mean and standard deviation.

Results and Discussions

Table 1: RQ1 – Extent of Application of TPR in Teaching English in Primary Schools

Item	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD
1	I frequently use TPR activities in my English lessons.	120	105	50	25	3.07	0.95
2	TPR is integrated into my lesson plans for teaching vocabulary.	110	115	45	30	3.02	0.96
3	Pupils are encouraged to respond physically to instructions.	130	120	35	15	3.22	0.87
4	I use TPR for teaching listening comprehension.	115	110	55	20	3.07	0.91
5	TPR is applied in my school as part of official methodology.	90	95	70	45	2.77	1.03

The results in Table 1 show a moderate-to-high extent of TPR application in teaching English, with mean scores ranging from 2.77 to 3.22. Physical response to instructions (3.22) is the most applied aspect, while formal school-wide adoption (2.77) is less consistent. Standard deviations indicate moderate variation in teachers' practices.

Table 2: RQ2 – Effectiveness of TPR in Improving Pupils' English Skills

Item	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD
6	TPR improves pupils' ability to follow instructions.	140	120	30	10	3.30	0.82
7	Pupils learn vocabulary faster with TPR.	135	115	35	15	3.23	0.88
8	TPR enhances pupils' listening comprehension.	125	125	35	15	3.20	0.87
9	Pupils retain vocabulary longer when taught using TPR.	120	115	40	25	3.10	0.94
10	TPR improves pupils' confidence in speaking English.	130	120	35	15	3.22	0.86

In Table 2, TPR is perceived as highly effective with means between 3.10 and 3.30. The greatest impact is on pupils' ability to follow instructions (3.30), while vocabulary retention scored slightly lower (3.10) but remains high. Low standard deviations reflect general agreement among teachers.

Table 3: RQ3 – Teachers’ Perceptions and Attitudes towards TPR.

Item	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD
11	I enjoy using TPR to teach.	125	120	35	20	3.17	0.90
12	TPR is suitable for teaching primary pupils.	140	110	30	20	3.23	0.89
13	TPR should be part of every English teacher’s methods.	135	115	35	15	3.23	0.89
14	I am confident in my ability to use TPR.	120	125	40	15	3.17	0.88
15	I recommend TPR to other English teachers.	130	115	35	20	3.18	0.91

Table 3 shows that teachers have positive attitudes towards TPR, with all means above 3.00. They particularly believe it suits primary pupils and should be part of every teacher’s methods (3.23 each). Standard deviations show consistent agreement across respondents.

Table 4: RQ4 – Challenges Faced in Implementing TPR.

Item	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD
16	Lack of training limits TPR use.	145	105	35	20	3.27	0.88
17	Large class sizes hinder TPR.	150	110	25	15	3.32	0.84
18	Limited teaching materials hinder TPR.	135	120	30	15	3.25	0.85
19	Pupils’ low English proficiency affects TPR.	130	125	30	15	3.23	0.84
20	Time constraints limit TPR use.	125	110	40	25	3.12	0.94

In Table 4, all listed challenges are significant with means from 3.12 to 3.32. Large class sizes (3.32) and lack of training (3.27) are the most pressing issues, while time constraints (3.12) are less severe but still notable. Responses are consistent among teachers.

Overall Summary of Findings

1. TPR is applied to a moderately high extent in FCT primary schools, with physical response activities being most common.
2. Teachers perceive TPR as highly effective in vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension and confidence building.
3. Teachers have positive attitudes towards TPR, supporting its integration into standard methodology.
4. Barriers are large class sizes, lack of training, limited materials and time constraints.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that Total Physical Response (TPR) is applied to a moderate-to-high extent in the teaching of English language in primary schools within the FCT. This aligns with Asher's (1977) theory that active bodily movement enhances language learning, particularly at the early stages. The high application of physical response to instructions and vocabulary teaching reflects earlier studies by Richards and Rodgers (2014), which emphasised TPR's suitability for teaching vocabulary, listening comprehension, and classroom instructions in primary school contexts. However, the relatively lower mean on formal school-wide adoption suggests that while individual teachers use TPR, institutional frameworks for its consistent implementation are lacking.

The study also found that teachers perceive TPR as highly effective in improving pupils' English language skills. This is consistent with Larsen-Freeman and Anderson's (2016) assertion that TPR facilitates retention, reduces learner anxiety, and promotes active engagement. The highest perceived benefit was in improving pupils' ability to follow instructions, which supports Nunan's (2015) observation that TPR strengthens listening comprehension and immediate language processing.

Teachers' attitudes towards TPR were generally positive, echoing the findings of Muro and Kafwamfwa (2019), who reported that teachers often favour interactive, movement-based strategies for young learners. High levels of enjoyment and confidence in using TPR suggest that many teachers are motivated to continue its use, despite challenges.

However, the study identified significant barriers to TPR implementation, including large class sizes, lack of training, limited teaching materials, and time constraints. These challenges are consistent with findings from Ogunmodede (2020), who noted that interactive teaching methods often face logistical and infrastructural obstacles in Nigerian classrooms. Large class sizes in particular hinder effective monitoring of pupils' responses, while inadequate training limits teachers' ability to adapt TPR creatively to varied learning needs.

Conclusions

Based on the findings, this study concludes that TPR is a valuable method for teaching English language at the primary school level in the FCT. It is generally applied by teachers, perceived as highly effective, and positively regarded for its ability to enhance listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and learner engagement. However, its consistent and optimal use is hampered by contextual challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teacher training, limited teaching resources, and

inadequate institutional support. Addressing these barriers will be essential for maximising TPR's potential in English language instruction.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are put forward:

- Education authorities should formally integrate TPR into the English language curriculum for primary schools to ensure consistent application.
- Regular workshops and in-service training should be organised to build teachers' capacity to use TPR effectively.
- Policies should be put in place to reduce overcrowding in primary school classrooms to enhance effective interaction and monitoring during TPR activities.
- Schools should be equipped with adequate teaching aids and materials that support movement-based learning.
- School timetables should allow sufficient time for activity-based language lessons to ensure TPR implementation.
- Continuous evaluation should be carried out to assess TPR's impact and to address emerging challenges in its application.

Reference

- EF Teacher Zone, (2017). An Introduction to Total Physical Response (and Four Activities to Try). Retrieved from.
- Eze, N. (2019). The impact of English as a second language on education in Nigeria. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 2(8), 123–133.
- Fakeye, D. O. (2017). Primary school pupils' exposure to English: Implications for acquisition of communicative competence. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 1(6), 590–595. <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.1.6.590-595>.
- Federal Ministry of Education (2014). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Huo, X. (2014). Learn English tenses through TPR. *Science & Technology Vision*, 47(32).10.19694/j.cnki.issn2095-2457.2014.32.077.
- Inyiagu, E. (2013). Adequacy of Quality Knowledge Possessed by Vocational and Technology Education Teachers on Method of Assessing Cognitive Based Objectives. *Journal of World Council for Curriculum Instruction (WCCI)*. Nigerian Chapter Forum. Vol. 9, No3. pp 45-51.
- Khairma, F. S., & Suryana, D. (2018). Implementation of TPR (Total Physical Response) method in learning English in Barunawati Kindergarten. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, vol337. Retrieved from <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>.
- Li, X. (2018). The application of TPR in child English teaching. *Overseas English*, 234(4).
- Obi, R.O. (2013). E-learning : An essential tools for promoting curriculum delivery in Colleges of Education. *The Journal of WCCI Nigerian Chapter*. Vol 6. No 3:118-0269.
- Odumu, T.O. (2013). *A Guide to Educational Research Report Writing*. Rex Charles and Patrick Limited, Nimo.
- Ogunleye, B. (2014). Cultural elements in English language instruction in Nigerian schools. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 5(23), 75-81.
- Ogunnaike, J. A., & Odunaike, K. (2015). The place of indigenous languages in Nigerian education. *International Journal*

of Humanities and Social Science Invention, 4(9), 36–41.

Okoh, N. (2015). Storytelling as a cultural tool in Nigerian classrooms. *African Journal of Educational Studies*, 8(2), 41–50.

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2013). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Song, L. (2016). TPR An effective way of teaching English. *Journal of Zhengzhou Railway Vocational college*, 12(4).

Suhendan Er, (2013). Using total physical response method in early childhood foreign language teaching environment. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 93 (2013) 1766-1768.

Tunde-Awe, B. (2014). The challenge of mother tongue-based multilingual education in Nigeria. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 2(4), 1–12.

Ummah, S. S. (2017). The implementation of TPR (Total Physical Response) method in teaching English for early childhood. *Advances in Social, Science, Education and Humanities Research*, vol 58. Retrieved from <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

Widodo, H. P. (2015). Teaching Children Using a Total Physical Response (TPR) Method: Rethinking Handoyo Puji Widodo. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 4(1), 64-74.

Wikipedia contributors, (2023). Total Physical Response. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from.

Yang, L. (2014). The application of TPR English teaching method in primary schools. *International Conference on Education, Language, Art and Intercultural Communication* 316-319. Retrieved from 10.2991/icelaic-14.2014.80.

Yusuf, A. (2016). The role of indigenous traditions in language pedagogy. *International Journal of Language and Communication Studies*, 4(1), 15-29.

Zuhdi, U., & Mintohari, (2019). English language communication in PGSD through the TPR method. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, vol382, Retrieved from <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>.

Zulpan, C., (2018). Total Physical Response (TPR). Its effect on pupils' achievement in reading procedure text. *Journal of English Educators Society*, 3 (2), 205-214.

Acknowledgement

My deepest thanks to Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) for recognizing the importance of research initiatives and for investing in the intellectual growth of individuals and the academic community as a whole. This sponsorship has not only enhanced the quality of my research but has also contributed to the overall advancement of knowledge in our academic institution.