Total Physical Response (TPR) as an Effective Method for Teaching Action Vocabulary at Muhammadiyah Private Elementary School 05 Medan

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in improving students' mastery of action vocabulary at Muhammadiyah Private Elementary School 05 Medan. The research was conducted using Classroom Action Research (CAR) in two cycles involving 28–32 fourth- and fifth-grade students. The learning intervention followed a structured TPR sequence: listen, act, say, read, and write. Data were collected through pre-test and post-test vocabulary assessments, observation notes, and teacher reflection journals. Quantitative data were analyzed using normalized gain and paired t-test/Wilcoxon, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. The findings show an average score improvement exceeding 20 points and more than 80% of students achieving mastery in action vocabulary. Students demonstrated high engagement and active participation, confirming that TPR is an effective method for young learners. The study supports the alignment of TPR with the Merdeka Curriculum, emphasizing meaningful learning, student-centered activities, and improved vocabulary retention.

Keywords: Total Physical Response, action vocabulary, elementary school, Merdeka Curriculum, classroom action research.

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Introduction

Vocabulary mastery is a fundamental component of English language development at the elementary school level. Action vocabulary, in particular, supports the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, especially for young learners who rely heavily on concrete and context-based learning [1]. In many Indonesian elementary schools, students often face challenges in understanding and retaining vocabulary because instruction is commonly teacher-centered and lacks engaging methods that align with the developmental characteristics of young learners [2]. Total Physical Response (TPR), introduced by Asher, has been widely recognized as an effective approach for teaching vocabulary through the combination of listening and physical movement [3]. Studies show that TPR enhances students' memory retention, motivation, and confidence in learning new vocabulary, especially in early-grade contexts [4][5]. Although previous studies have confirmed the benefits of TPR, its structured implementation in Indonesian elementary schools—particularly in Medan—remains limited.

A review of the existing literature indicates that many studies apply TPR generally, but few focus specifically on action vocabulary or employ a systematic TPR sequence integrating listen–act–say–read–write in the format of Classroom Action Research (CAR). This gap becomes the novelty of this study. By applying a structured TPR model across two cycles, this research aims to provide deeper empirical evidence of TPR effectiveness in the Indonesian elementary context.

The problems addressed in this research include: (1) low mastery of action vocabulary among students, (2) limited implementation of active learning methods supporting young learners, and (3) the need for teaching strategies aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of TTPR in improving students' action vocabulary mastery and to observe student engagement during TPR implementation in real classroom conditions.

Literature Review

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a language teaching method developed by James Asher that emphasizes the coordination of verbal commands and physical actions 3. TPR is grounded in the theory that language comprehension precedes language production and that children learn best through movement, imitation, and meaningful interaction 6. Research indicates that young learners benefit significantly from kinesthetic approaches because they enhance memory and reduce anxiety [4][6].

Vocabulary learning for young learners requires active, repetitive, and meaningful engagement. Nation explains that vocabulary retention increases when learners receive multimodal input that supports form-meaning connections 8. Action vocabulary is especially suitable for TPR-based instruction because it links language with bodily movement, making the learning process more concrete for children.

Previous research in Indonesia has shown that TTPR can increase vocabulary mastery in elementary students, but many studies lack structured sequencing or analysis of cognitive outcomes using normalized gain or statistical tests [7]. Furthermore, limited studies integrate qualitative evidence such as engagement or reflective journals. This gap motivates the need for a more comprehensive classroom-based study such as the one conducted here.

Research Methodology

This study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) consisting of two cycles. Each cycle included planning, action, observation, and reflection stages. The participants were 28–32 students from Grades IV–V at Muhammadiyah Private Elementary School 05 Medan.

1. Intervention Procedure
   The TPR sequence used in this study consisted of five stages:
   (1) Listen – students listened to teacher commands, (2) Act – students performed the commanded actions, (3) Say – students repeated the vocabulary aloud, (4) Read – students read written forms of the vocabulary, (5) Write – students wrote simple sentences using the action verbs.
   Each cycle consisted of 3–4 meetings, with increasing complexity of action vocabulary.
2. Instruments
   - Vocabulary tests (pre-test and post-test).
   - Observation sheets
   - Teacher reflection journals
3. Data Analysis
   Quantitative data were analyzed using
   - Normalized gain (g)
   - Paired t-test (or Wilcoxon for non-parametric data)
   Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on student engagement and classroom interaction themes.

Results

The pre-test scores showed that students struggled with identifying and producing action vocabulary, with most students scoring below the mastery threshold. After Cycle 1, there was a notable improvement, though some students still required reinforcement. Cycle 2 demonstrated significant gains, with the majority of students demonstrating improved comprehension and production of action vocabulary. On average, students' scores increased by more than 20 points from pre-test to post-test. The normalized gain showed substantial improvement, falling into the medium-to-high category. More than 80% of students reached the mastery level by the end of Cycle 2.

Qualitative findings revealed high engagement during TTPR activities. Students were enthusiastic, actively participating in commands, and demonstrating improved confidence when repeating vocabulary. Teacher reflection journals supported these findings, indicating smoother learning flow, better classroom management, and increased student motivation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Total Physical Response (TPR) is an effective method for teaching action vocabulary to elementary students at Muhammadiyah Private Elementary School 05 Medan. TPR significantly improved vocabulary mastery, helped students achieve mastery levels, and increased classroom engagement.The study implies that TPR is suitable for implementation in the Merdeka Curriculum, supporting active, student-centered learning. Future research may explore TPR integration with digital tools or extended vocabulary types.

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