



# Foundation phase teachers' perspectives on the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach in facilitating second language acquisition: A qualitative study in Buffalo City District primary schools

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the influence of the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach on improving English vocabulary acquisition among young learners and examined whether learner engagement is enhanced through the coordination of language and physical movement. The aim was to evaluate TPR as a teaching method aligned with how children naturally acquire language, combining verbal commands with physical actions to support first additional language learning effectively. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences informs teaching practices and strategies that foster real-world language acquisition in early childhood. A qualitative approach was used, and three primary schools from the township and rural areas were purposively selected. Data was collected through observations and semi-structured interviews with six Grade Three teachers. Thematic analysis was used to interpret data. Findings revealed that learners exposed to TPR showed marked improvement in vocabulary acquisition and retention compared to traditional methods. Social and interpersonal skills improved, and language learning anxiety was reduced. Learners understood instructions given in their first additional language, which increased their engagement and motivation. The use of physical actions created a dynamic classroom environment conducive to active participation. The study concluded that TPR effectively supports early language acquisition by aligning with children's natural learning tendencies and enhancing engagement through embodied cognition. It was recommended that teachers receive ongoing support and training to implement TPR strategies effectively. This research contributes to the body of knowledge by advancing learner-centered, innovative first additional language teaching practices that integrate movement and cognitive engagement, ultimately promoting better language outcomes and reducing anxiety in diverse educational contexts.

**Keywords:** Total Physical Response, Early Childhood, First additional Language, Multiple intelligence, Physical actions

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**PUBLICATION HISTORY** - Received : 9<sup>th</sup> June, 2025 | Accepted: 11<sup>th</sup> November, 2025 | Published: 18<sup>th</sup> February, 2026.

**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE** - Nqoma, Lungiswa. "Foundation phase teachers' perspectives on the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach in facilitating second language acquisition: A qualitative study in Buffalo City District primary schools." *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 7, no.1 (2026): 27 - 44. <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2026713>

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## INTRODUCTION

In today's connected world, being able to communicate in multiple languages is essential for building relationships and understanding across cultures. In early childhood classrooms, English teaching is conducted in order to develop an international perspective in learning and utilizing their critical stage to introduce a new language. However, the processes for teaching English for young children still have difficulties, especially in developing the material, learning activities, and the methods which respond to their needs and characteristics.<sup>1</sup> Children who lack adequate language instruction may encounter significant academic and social challenges in multicultural environments.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the effective teaching of a first additional language to young children is a pressing concern within early childhood education, especially in South African rural schools where English first additional language instruction is used from Grade Four.<sup>3</sup> Hence, Yesbolatkyzy suggests the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach in early childhood classrooms as a dynamic and interactive method of language teaching that integrates physical movement with language learning.<sup>4</sup> He also highlights that TPR is grounded in the understanding that language learning occurs most effectively when learners are actively engaged in the learning process through physical actions that correspond to verbal commands.<sup>5</sup> The TPR approach mirrors the natural language acquisition process observed in young children, who learn to communicate by associating words with actions and gestures.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Mariyam and Musfiroh emphasize that it is at this stage, pre-operational (2-7 years), according to Piaget's children's development stages, where they need a concrete situation to process the idea.<sup>7</sup>

Given the critical role of early childhood in language development, TPR is particularly effective at this stage, where children are often more responsive to kinaesthetic learning styles, which compels a framework for enhancing second language learning among young learners.<sup>8</sup> Research also indicates that early childhood is a pivotal period for language learning, as children's brains are particularly receptive to new linguistic input.<sup>9</sup> The plasticity of young learners' cognitive abilities allows them to absorb new languages more readily than older learners. Consequently, employing approaches that align with their natural learning tendencies is essential for effective language instruction. Hence, Poalacin Pilaguisin and Aysalla Guanoluisa encourage the use of TPR in ECD classrooms as it not only facilitates vocabulary acquisition but also fosters a low anxiety learning environment, which is crucial for young learners who may feel intimidated by the prospect of learning a new language.<sup>10</sup>

The application of TPR in diverse educational contexts, including bilingual immersion programs, highlights its versatility and effectiveness in fostering language proficiency among young learners.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, engaging young children in physical activities that correspond to language commands reinforces

<sup>1</sup> Emily Kaplan, "6 Essential Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners," *Edutopia*, George Lucas Educational Foundation 12 (2019).

<sup>2</sup> Luke Plonsky, "Language Learning Strategy Instruction:," in *Learning Strategy Instruction in the Language Classroom* (Channel View Publications, 2019), 3–21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.22730667.9>.

<sup>3</sup> Janice Bland, "Teaching English to Young Learners: More Teacher Education and More Children's Literature!," *Online Submission 7*, no. 2 (2019): 79–103.

<sup>4</sup> K.A. Yesbolatkyzy, "The Total Physical Response (TPR) Method In Language Teaching: Principles And Effectiveness.," in *In the Fergana State University Conference*, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Yesbolatkyzy, "The Total Physical Response (TPR) Method In Language Teaching: Principles And Effectiveness."

<sup>6</sup> C. Martins, "Teaching EFL to Young Learners: Exploring the Effects of Motivation by Means of Playful and Interactive Approaches in Class," 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Siti Nurfalah Mariyam and Tadkiroatun Musfiroh, "Total Physical Response (TPR) Method in Improving English Vocabulary Acquisition of 5-6 Years Old Children," *Tadris: Jurnal Keguruan Dan Ilmu Tarbiyah* 4, no. 2 (2019): 257–64.

<sup>8</sup> Dorela Kacauni, "Learning Styles of Young Learners in the Learning Process of a Foreign Language," 2023.

<sup>9</sup> P. Râmă-Ory, "Language Acquisition in Early Years of Childhood: The Role of Family and Pre-Primary Education," UNESCO, 2023, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387215>.

<sup>10</sup> Alicia Maribel Poalacin Pilaguisin and David Fernando Aysalla Guanoluisa, "Total Physical Response (TPR) Method to Develop the English Listening Skill in EFL Students" (Pujilí: Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi (UTC), 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Sanako, "The Total Physical Response (TPR) Method in Bilingual Education: Learning through Movement," *Jump Immersion School Blog*, 2024, <https://jumpimmersion.com/total-physical-response-method-in-bilingual-education/>.

vocabulary and grammatical structures memorably and enjoyably.<sup>12</sup> Diana, et.al., highlight that TPR has been shown to improve not only language comprehension but also social and interpersonal skills, as children work collaboratively and engage in interactive learning experiences.<sup>13</sup> As primary school educators increasingly recognize the benefits of early language learning in learner-centred classrooms, TPR stands out as a valuable strategy. However, implementing TPR in early childhood classrooms can present several challenges. Effective implementation of TPR requires teachers to be exposed to or well-trained in its techniques.<sup>14</sup> Adequate training equips teachers with the skills to effectively incorporate TPR into ESL classrooms, creating dynamic and engaging learning environments.<sup>15</sup> This includes understanding how to provide clear and concise commands, use gestures and physical cues, and create a positive and supportive environment for learners.

Moreover, TPR activities often involve movement and physical interaction, which can lead to difficulties in maintaining order and discipline and teachers may struggle to manage energetic learners effectively, particularly in large classes.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, some children may prefer visual or auditory methods over kinesthetic learning, thus limiting the approach's overall effectiveness.<sup>17</sup> Resource limitations can create a real challenge for schools when it comes to incorporating Total Physical Response (TPR) activities, restricting the types of movements and interactions that can be safely performed.<sup>18</sup> Lastly, teachers often face pressure to adhere strictly to curriculum requirements, which may not allow for the flexible, dynamic nature of TPR, hindering its integration into regular lesson plans.<sup>19</sup> By recognizing these challenges, educators can better prepare for and address potential barriers to effectively implementing TPR in early childhood classrooms. EFAL learners often struggle with vocabulary acquisition due to limited exposure to English, especially in rural areas, which can impede their ability to understand and produce English accurately and fluently.<sup>20</sup> Inadequate English vocabulary knowledge can also lead to academic difficulties, such as difficulty understanding reading materials and lower academic achievement.<sup>21</sup> Research indicates a strong correlation between vocabulary development and academic success, with a limited vocabulary impacting a learner's ability to comprehend complex texts and express themselves effectively in both spoken and written language.<sup>22</sup> Thus, implementing TPR in such grades helps learners develop listening comprehension and oral fluency whilst reducing their pressure and fear in an interesting learning process.

Therefore, it is essential to address the shortcomings of current first additional language teaching practices in early childhood education and implement innovative, learner-centered approaches, such as the TPR approach, to significantly enhance EFAL acquisition, reduce anxiety of language learning, and promote social skills among diverse young learners. Hence, a paradigm shift in language teaching methodologies is urgently needed to equip young learners with the skills necessary for success in an interconnected world.

The following research question was used to explore perspectives of Foundation Phase teachers on the TPR approach in facilitating second language acquisition in selected primary schools in Buffalo City District:

<sup>12</sup> J.Z. Karshiboyevna and I. Madina, "Total Physical Response (TPR) Method For Teaching Foreign Languages," *Zamonaviy Ta'lim Tizimini Rivojlantirish Va Unga Qaratilgan Kreativ G'oyalar, Takliflar Va Yechimlar* 7, no. 74 (2024): 83–86.

<sup>13</sup> Diana Melani Wahyu et al., "Enhancing Social Awareness through Total Physical Response (TPR) in Teaching English at Elementary School," *English Education: Journal of English Teaching and Research* 7, no. 1 (2022): 1–9.

<sup>14</sup> Rong Xie, "The Effectiveness of Total Physical Response (TPR) on Teaching English to Young Learners," *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 12, no. 2 (March 1, 2021): 293, <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1202.11>.

<sup>15</sup> Xie, "The Effectiveness of Total Physical Response (TPR) on Teaching English to Young Learners."

<sup>16</sup> R. Miller, "Total Physical Response and Classroom Management Challenges in Large Classes," in *In Teaching English to Young Learners: Approaches and Practices* (Routledge, 2014), 45–62.

<sup>17</sup> Howard E Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (Basic books, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Xie, "The Effectiveness of Total Physical Response (TPR) on Teaching English to Young Learners."

<sup>19</sup> Miller, "Total Physical Response and Classroom Management Challenges in Large Classes."

<sup>20</sup> Liziwe Fesi and Vusi Mncube, "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 3 (2021).

<sup>21</sup> Yang Dong et al., "Contribution of Vocabulary Knowledge to Reading Comprehension among Chinese Students: A Meta-Analysis," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020): 525369.

<sup>22</sup> Dong et al., "Contribution of Vocabulary Knowledge to Reading Comprehension among Chinese Students: A Meta-Analysis."

- How does the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach in early childhood second language classrooms impact vocabulary acquisition, learner engagement, and the development of social skills among young learners?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Enhanced Vocabulary Acquisition Through Total Physical Response (TPR)

TPR has become a valuable approach in early childhood second language learning, particularly when it comes to vocabulary acquisition. The beauty of TPR lies in its use of physical movement in response to verbal commands, much like how children naturally learn their first language. TPR creates strong connections in the brain between speech and action. Yuquilema Mullo highlights how TPR taps into the native processes of language acquisition seen in young children, where movement plays a key role in learning.<sup>23</sup> By associating specific actions with new vocabulary, children are not only able to remember words more effectively but also to recall them when needed. Research has shown that the kinesthetic approach enhances memorization and reinforces long-term retention of vocabulary.<sup>24</sup> For example, children who participate in TPR activities tend to perform better on assessments because their physical involvement strengthens memory pathways, making the learning experience much more impactful. Moreover, TPR addresses the various learning styles present in early childhood classrooms, especially catering to kinesthetic learners who thrive on movement and interaction. This adaptability makes TPR especially effective for young learners, many of whom find traditional rote memorization techniques challenging.<sup>25</sup> When learners actively engage in their learning through movement, they demonstrate higher levels of enthusiasm and motivation, two critical elements in mastering a new language.<sup>26</sup> By creating an interactive and fun learning environment, TPR not only boosts vocabulary acquisition but also encourages learners to take risks in using the language, significantly aiding their overall linguistic development. Combining TPR with other engaging methods, like songs and flashcards, can further enrich listening skills and vocabulary growth in young learners.<sup>27</sup>

### Techniques for Teaching Efal With Tpr In Early Childhood Classrooms

Teaching English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) in early childhood classrooms presents unique challenges and opportunities.<sup>28</sup> While young learners at this stage are receptive to new languages, interesting and engaging methods should be implemented for effective language acquisition.<sup>29</sup> These methods should leverage the natural curiosity and playfulness of children to create a positive and stimulating learning environment. Below are techniques that ECD teachers may implement.

### Incorporates Everyday Activities

Incorporating everyday activities into Total Physical Response (TPR) lessons is an effective way to make language learning relevant and meaningful for young children. By integrating vocabulary and commands into familiar daily routines such as getting 'go out, sweep, eat, or stand up', teachers help learners connect the target language to real-life experiences.<sup>30</sup> This contextualized approach enhances comprehension

<sup>23</sup> Diego Yuquilema Mullo, "The Effect of the Total Physical Response (TPR) Method on the English Vocabulary Acquisition," 2024.

<sup>24</sup> N. Nuraeni, "The Role of Qualitative Research in Understanding Educational Practices," *Journal of Educational Research and Practice* 9, no. 1 (2019): 25–38.

<sup>25</sup> M. Gonzalez, "Challenges in Implementing TPR in Diverse Classrooms," *Education Journal* 45, no. 2 (2021): 112–24.

<sup>26</sup> A. Bowers, "The Impact of Total Physical Response on Vocabulary Acquisition," *Journal of Language Teaching Research* 8, no. 4 (2017): 523–38.

<sup>27</sup> Muhammad Furqon et al., "The Impact of Learning Management System (LMS) Usage on Students," *TEM Journal*, May 29, 2023, 1082–89, <https://doi.org/10.18421/TEM122-54>.

<sup>28</sup> A. Naimova, "Teaching English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) in Early Childhood Classrooms: Challenges and Opportunities," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Education and Language Learning (ICELL 2023)* (Tashkent State Pedagogical University, 2023).

<sup>29</sup> Ying Lin, "Review of the Effects of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety on Learners' Development of a Second Language Acquisition," *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 26 (2024): 979–85.

<sup>30</sup> D. Larsen-Freeman and M. Anderson, *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2011).

because learners already have a cognitive and experiential framework for understanding the actions that are taught. Therefore, using everyday actions in TPR lessons strengthens memory retention through motor activity and repetition. Richards and Rodgers emphasize that making commands within daily life contexts increases engagement, as learners are more likely to be interested in and understand language that reflects their routines.<sup>31</sup> This strategy not only supports vocabulary acquisition but also encourages the practical use of language, thereby bridging the gap between classroom learning and real-world communication.

### Storytelling with TPR

In this approach, teachers narrate stories while learners act out the key vocabulary and actions.<sup>32</sup> This method not only makes learning fun and engaging but also helps learners contextualize new words and phrases.<sup>33</sup> By physically embodying the story, learners create stronger connections between language and meaning, improving both comprehension and retention.<sup>34</sup> In early childhood settings, storytelling supports the development of sequencing skills, listening comprehension, and cooperative behaviour, as learners often participate in group storytelling activities. Storytelling combined with TPR is a powerful technique that enriches language learning by embedding new vocabulary and structures within meaningful, narrative contexts. By acting out the events of a story using gestures, facial expressions, and movement, learners engage both cognitively and physically, which enhances comprehension and memory retention.<sup>35</sup> This technique aligns with the principles of TPR by allowing children to demonstrate understanding through physical actions before being required to produce language verbally. Kantor emphasized the effectiveness of dramatizing stories to create a more immersive and enjoyable language experience, particularly for young learners who benefit from imaginative play and movement.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, Richards and Rodgers note that TPR storytelling can increase motivation and attention, as narratives naturally capture interest and provide a meaningful context for using language.<sup>37</sup> Incorporating storytelling with TPR is a dynamic technique that enhances language acquisition.<sup>38</sup>

### Use Props and Visuals

Using props and visuals is a highly effective technique in TPR instruction, especially for young language learners who thrive on concrete, sensory experiences. Items such as toys, classroom objects, and everyday materials help bridge the gap between abstract language and real-world meaning, making vocabulary and commands more accessible and memorable.<sup>39</sup> Visual aids such as flashcards, pictures, and posters also play a crucial role in enhancing language comprehension and guiding learner responses during TPR activities. Al-Farisi et.al. advocated for the integration of physical objects into lessons to enhance kinesthetic learning and provide immediate context for action-based commands.<sup>40</sup> This approach supports the natural language learning process by engaging multiple modalities, visual, auditory, and physical, simultaneously. Richards and Rodgers emphasize that the use of visuals and props not only aids comprehension but also maintains

<sup>31</sup> Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> American TESOL Institute, *TESOL Learning Methods: Total Physical Response (TPR) and Storytelling Approaches* (American TESOL Institute, 2024), <https://americantesol.com/tesol-learning-methods.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Lin, "Review of the Effects of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety on Learners' Development of a Second Language Acquisition."

<sup>34</sup> J. J. Asher, *Learning Another Language through Actions: The Complete Teacher's Guidebook*, 7th ed. (Sky Oaks Productions, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Matt Bromley, "Using Story to Engage Learners' Curiosity and Wonder," in *The Stories We Tell* (London: Routledge, 2024), 63–90, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003465492-10>.

<sup>36</sup> Jessica Kantor, "Discovering a Language of Stories in Immersive Storytelling: An Essential First Step," in *Handbook of Research on the Global Impacts and Roles of Immersive Media* (IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2020), 142–57.

<sup>37</sup> Richards and Rodgers, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*.

<sup>38</sup> Nuraeningsih Nuraeningsih and Rusiana Rusiana, "Improving Students' Vocabulary Mastery through TPR Storytelling," *IJELTAL (Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics)* 1, no. 1 (November 6, 2016): 49, <https://doi.org/10.21093/ijeltal.v1i1.3>.

<sup>39</sup> Nizar Ahmad Al-Farisi et al., "The Implementation of Total Physical Response Method with Pictures to Enhance Students' Vocabulary and Creativity," *Journal of Studies in Academic, Humanities, Research, and Innovation* 2, no. 1 (2025): 12–23.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Farisi et al., "The Implementation of Total Physical Response Method with Pictures to Enhance Students' Vocabulary and Creativity."

learner attention and reduces cognitive overload by making new language more relatable and concrete.<sup>41</sup> In early childhood settings, where abstract thinking is still developing, such multisensory techniques are particularly valuable for sustaining engagement and supporting long-term retention.

### Learner Engagement And Motivation Through TPR

Many researchers highlight the multifaceted benefits of TPR, emphasising its relevance in contemporary language education. Bowers observed that learners who participated in TPR-based lessons demonstrated significantly higher vocabulary retention compared to those who received traditional instruction.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Lopez indicated that TPR not only improved language skills but also enhanced social interaction and collaboration among learners, leading to a more cohesive learning environment.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Zhang et al. concluded that TPR is particularly effective in reducing language anxiety among early learners, thereby fostering a more conducive learning atmosphere.<sup>44</sup>

Total Physical Response (TPR) has been shown to significantly enhance learner engagement and motivation in language learning. By integrating physical movement with language instruction, TPR caters to kinesthetic learners and creates a dynamic, interactive environment.<sup>45</sup> This approach reduces anxiety by emphasizing comprehension before production, allowing learners to internalize the language at their own pace.<sup>46</sup> Studies indicate that TPR fosters a low-stress environment, boosting self-esteem and confidence, as learners feel secure responding through actions.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, TPR's enjoyable and game-like activities increase enthusiasm and create a positive classroom atmosphere, making language learning a fun and memorable experience.<sup>48</sup>

### Challenges and Considerations of Implementing TPR in Early Childhood Classrooms

The successful implementation of the TPR approach in early childhood settings may be influenced by various factors.<sup>49</sup> One major limitation is that TPR is most suitable for teaching concrete vocabulary and simple commands, and it becomes less effective when addressing abstract language concepts or more complex grammatical structures.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, the physical nature of TPR demands ample classroom space and strong classroom management skills, which can be difficult to maintain in overcrowded settings or with highly active children.<sup>51</sup> Another consideration is teacher readiness—TPR requires energy, creativity, and comfort with performance-based instruction, which not all educators possess without proper training and experience.<sup>52</sup> Time constraints also pose a challenge, as TPR can be time-consuming, particularly when incorporating repetition and movement to reinforce new vocabulary. Furthermore, the diversity of learners must be acknowledged; some children may be shy, have physical limitations, or prefer other learning styles, making it necessary to adapt or combine TPR with other teaching methods.<sup>53</sup> Finally, assessing language

<sup>41</sup> Richards and Rodgers, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*.

<sup>42</sup> Bowers, "The Impact of Total Physical Response on Vocabulary Acquisition."

<sup>43</sup> R. Lopez, "Enhancing Language Learning through TPR: A Case Study," *International Journal of Early Childhood Education* 30, no. 1 (2022): 67–82.

<sup>44</sup> Y. Zhang, J. Liu, and H. Wang, "A Meta-Analysis of Kinesthetic Learning Strategies in Language Education," *Language Learning Research* 15, no. 2 (2023): 101–19.

<sup>45</sup> Verbal Planet, "TPR – Total Physical Response Language Learning Explained," Verbal Planet Blog, 2023, <https://www.verbalplanet.com/blog/tpr-total-physical-response-language-learning.asp>.

<sup>46</sup> Yuquilema Mullo, "The Effect of the Total Physical Response (TPR) Method on the English Vocabulary Acquisition."

<sup>47</sup> Yuquilema Mullo, "The Effect of the Total Physical Response (TPR) Method on the English Vocabulary Acquisition."

<sup>48</sup> Yuquilema Mullo, "The Effect of the Total Physical Response (TPR) Method on the English Vocabulary Acquisition."

<sup>49</sup> Pei-Lin Liu, Chiu-Jung Chen, and Hsiao-Chen Chen, "Teaching Young EFL Learners New Vocabulary: A Comparison of the Efficiency of Traditional and Personalized TPR Strategies," *SAGE Open* 14, no. 4 (2024): 21582440241288924.

<sup>50</sup> Liu, Chen, and Chen, "Teaching Young EFL Learners New Vocabulary: A Comparison of the Efficiency of Traditional and Personalized TPR Strategies."

<sup>51</sup> P. Pahari, "The Implementation of Total Physical Response (TPR) Method in Improving Arabic Speaking Skills," *Tanwir Arabiyyah: Arabic As Foreign Language Journal* 1, no. 2 (December 10, 2021): 63–72, <https://doi.org/10.31869/afllj.v1i2.2872>.

<sup>52</sup> Pahari, "The Implementation of Total Physical Response (TPR) Method in Improving Arabic Speaking Skills."

<sup>53</sup> Wahyu et al., "Enhancing Social Awareness through Total Physical Response (TPR) in Teaching English at Elementary School."

development can be problematic, as TPR primarily measures receptive comprehension through physical response, rather than productive language skills such as speaking or writing.<sup>54</sup> These factors suggest that while TPR is a valuable approach, its success depends on thoughtful integration into a broader, balanced instructional framework.

On the other hand, TPR promotes a positive and interactive classroom environment, which is crucial for motivating young learners. Research indicates that when learners are actively involved in their learning through movement, they exhibit increased engagement and reduced anxiety, leading to a more conducive atmosphere for language acquisition.<sup>55</sup> Teachers employing TPR often report higher levels of participation and enthusiasm among learners, which can significantly enhance the learning experience.<sup>56</sup> The dynamic nature of TPR activities fosters collaboration and social interaction, allowing children to practice their language skills in a supportive context. Consequently, the TPR approach not only aids in language learning but also contributes to the development of essential social skills, making it an invaluable tool in early childhood education.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Multiple Intelligences (MI) Theory

Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory posits that individuals possess various types of intelligences, including linguistic, bodily-kinesthetic, and interpersonal intelligences.<sup>57</sup> The theory emphasizes the importance of addressing the whole child, encompassing emotional, social, and cognitive development. This holistic approach mitigates anxiety related to language learning, allowing children to express themselves in a supportive environment. Such an approach is crucial in early childhood settings, where learning experiences must cater to various developmental domains. TPR aligns well with this theory by catering to different intelligences and providing diverse learning experiences. This alignment not only validates individual learning preferences but also enhances overall engagement and motivation in language learning.<sup>58</sup> In early childhood education, children demonstrate diverse intelligences, including linguistic, bodily-kinaesthetic, spatial, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, logical-mathematical, and naturalistic. The TPR approach particularly supports bodily-kinesthetic intelligence by integrating physical movements with language commands. This method recognizes varying learning styles and promotes an inclusive environment where every child can thrive. By aligning teaching strategies with a child's preferred intelligence, educators can enhance engagement and motivation.<sup>59</sup> TPR's dynamic approach captivates young learners, making language acquisition enjoyable and reducing feelings of intimidation. When children use their bodies to demonstrate understanding, they actively participate, leading to improved vocabulary retention and language proficiency, which are essential components of early childhood education.

## METHODOLOGY

This study explored the contribution of TPR to a more in-depth understanding of effective teaching practices in language education, particularly in early childhood settings. It investigated how EFAL early childhood teachers (grade 3) from isiXhosa communities linked spoken English with physical movements to enhance EFAL acquisition, developing vocabulary retention and early communication skills in early childhood classrooms. Thus, the study employed a qualitative research approach. Islam and Aldaihani recommend the qualitative research approach when you need to understand the settings or contexts in which participants can

<sup>54</sup> Yuquilema Mullo, "The Effect of the Total Physical Response (TPR) Method on the English Vocabulary Acquisition."

<sup>55</sup> Nuraeni, "The Role of Qualitative Research in Understanding Educational Practices."

<sup>56</sup> Gonzalez, "Challenges in Implementing TPR in Diverse Classrooms."

<sup>57</sup> Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*.

<sup>58</sup> E. Bialystok, *Bilingualism in Development: Language, Literacy, and Cognition* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*.

address or outline an issue or problem.<sup>60</sup> It allows readers to know something new and probably find viable solutions to a problem. The research design that was employed was the case study design to gain in-depth insights into the implementation and effectiveness of the TPR approach in the acquisition of EFAL and the development of English vocabulary in grade 3 learners. Moreover, the design is suitable for the collection of rich, descriptive data that can reveal grade 3 teachers' experiences and perceptions on incorporating TPR EFAL activities in grade 3 classrooms.<sup>61</sup> Sampling for the study included eight grade 3 foundation phase teachers who were purposively selected from four primary schools in the Buffalo City District. The teachers had varying levels of experience with second language instruction and TPR, providing a comprehensive perspective on the approach's efficacy.<sup>62</sup> One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with the eight foundation phase teachers from four primary schools to gain qualitative data on their perceptions of TPR effectiveness in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and learner engagement, and the data was interpreted through thematic analysis. Ethical considerations were observed by ensuring voluntary participation, maintaining confidentiality, and respecting the rights and dignity of all participants throughout the research process.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

### Theme 1: Enhanced Vocabulary Acquisition

**Interview question:** How has the implementation of the TPR approach influenced the vocabulary acquisition in your classroom?

The theme delves into how using TPR in the classroom enhances vocabulary learning, learner participation, memory retention, and language comprehension.

*Teacher 1: "The TPR approach has transformed how my learners acquire vocabulary. When they act out the words, they remember them much better. For example, after a TPR lesson on animals, they could all name and imitate the sounds of each animal the next day!"*

*Teacher 2: "I've noticed that my learners are much more enthusiastic about learning new words. TPR makes vocabulary lessons dynamic. They don't just hear the words; they live them, which really helps with retention."*

*Teacher 3: "Since implementing TPR, I've seen a significant increase in the number of words my learners can use in conversation. They're not just memorizing; they're using the vocabulary in context during playtime."*

*Teacher 4: "TPR has helped bridge the gap for my struggling learners. Those who typically find it hard to remember words now connect actions with vocabulary, making it easier for them to recall the words later. It's like a light bulb goes on for them."*

The findings revealed that using Total Physical Response (TPR) in language teaching greatly improves how learners learn new vocabulary. They emphasized that when learners physically act out words and phrases, it turns the learning process into a hands-on experience that helps them understand and remember better. Participants highlighted that learners are more involved and eager to join in on lessons when they can link language to physical movements. They also mentioned that this approach not only helps with memory retention but also boosts learners' confidence, as they feel more capable when responding.

<sup>60</sup> Md Asadul Islam and Faraj Mazyed Faraj Aldaihani, "Justification for Adopting Qualitative Research Method, Research Approaches, Sampling Strategy, Sample Size, Interview Method, Saturation, and Data Analysis," *Journal of International Business and Management* 5, no. 1 (2022): 1–11.

<sup>61</sup> Nuraeni, "The Role of Qualitative Research in Understanding Educational Practices."

<sup>62</sup> A. Benkhaoua, N. Hattab, and A. Boughanem, "Teachers' Perceptions of Total Physical Response in Language Teaching," *International Journal of Language Studies* 13, no. 1 (2019): 1–18.

## **Theme 2: Increased Learner Engagement**

**Interview Question:** In what ways have you observed changes in learner engagement when using TPR compared to traditional teaching methods?

This theme aimed to reflect on how learner engagement has changed since the adoption of TPR in English First Additional Language (EFAL) lessons.

**Teacher 1:** *“With TPR, my learners are constantly moving, smiling, and participating. In the past, some would switch off during vocabulary lessons, but now they all want a turn to act out the words. It’s like they forget they’re even in an EFAL lesson, they’re just having fun while learning!”*

**Teacher 2:** *“I’ve noticed that even the quietest learners are more willing to take part. Before, they’d stay silent or avoid answering, but now they’re confidently joining in with the actions and even helping others. It’s really built their confidence and interest.”*

**Teacher 3:** *“The energy in the classroom has completely changed. Traditional methods felt a bit rigid, but with TPR, the learners are excited and attentive. They laugh, engage, and seem more connected to the content because they’re involved with their whole bodies.”*

**Teacher 4:** *“Engagement has improved, especially for my learners with short attention spans. When we use TPR, they stay focused longer because the lesson is interactive and fast-paced. They don’t get bored, they’re always ready for the next movement or word.”*

Teachers reported a marked improvement in learner engagement across all responses. Learners who were previously passive and uninterested were actively participating, smiling, and looking forward to lessons. Even quiet or reserved learners became more confident and eager to join in. The classroom environment has transformed into a more dynamic and enjoyable space, with learners displaying sustained attention and enthusiasm, especially those with shorter attention spans. Incorporating physical movement has made the content more accessible and enjoyable, turning the learning experience into one that is both playful and effective.

## **Theme 3: Development of social skills**

**Interview question:** Can you describe any specific instances where TPR activities have facilitated the development of social skills in your classrooms?

The theme aimed to discover how TPR improved collaboration, communication abilities, confidence and social connection among learners.

**Teacher 1:** *“During a TPR lesson about animals, I paired the children to act out different animals. They had to communicate using gestures and simple English phrases. It helped them work together and build friendships while learning new vocabulary!”*

**Teacher 2:** *“In a recent TPR activity, my learners had to give each other commands like 'jump' or 'clap.' They encouraged one another, which created a supportive atmosphere. Even those who were shy started to participate more actively.”*

**Teacher 3:** *“We did a TPR game where learners formed small groups to act out a story. They had to discuss what actions to perform, which helped them practice speaking in English and learn how to express their ideas with each other.”*

**Teacher 4:** *“One day, we had a TPR session on body parts, and the learners worked in pairs to label each other as they pointed to different parts. They laughed and helped each other, which really built their confidence and social connections.”*

Findings highlight the effectiveness of TPR in promoting social skills within the classroom. By engaging learners in activities that require collaboration, learners learn to communicate and support one another. These activities encourage even shy learners to participate, fostering a sense of belonging and boosting their confidence. Group discussions during storytelling and interactive labeling of body parts further enhance their ability to express ideas and build friendships.

#### **Theme 4: Application of TPR Strategies in the Classroom**

**Interview Question:** Which TPR techniques do you use in your classroom and how do you use them?

The theme aims to explore the specific TPR techniques the foundation phase teachers incorporated into their daily teaching practices and how they implemented them to enhance vocabulary acquisition, comprehension, and classroom engagement.

**Teacher 1:** *“I use action songs a lot. For example, when we learn verbs like ‘jump,’ ‘run,’ or ‘clap,’ I play songs that include those actions, and the children act them out. It’s fun and helps them remember the words through movement.”*

**Teacher 2:** *“One technique I use is storytelling with actions. I tell a simple story and assign movements to key words. The learners listen and do the actions when they hear those words. It keeps them alert and involved in the story.”*

**Teacher 3:** *“I often use command games like ‘Simon Says’ to teach new vocabulary. I say things like ‘touch your head’ or ‘open the door,’ and they have to follow the action. It helps them learn to listen carefully and associate words with actions.”*

**Teacher 4:** *“I use role-play where learners act out real-life scenarios, like going to the shop or visiting the doctor. They use the vocabulary while doing the actions, which helps them practice language in context and also builds their confidence.”*

Findings revealed that teachers used a range of TPR techniques, including action songs, command games, storytelling with physical responses, and role-playing real-life situations. These methods not only made lessons more interactive but also helped learners connect language to meaning through movement. The responses showed that teachers intentionally select TPR strategies that match their lesson objectives, such as using songs to teach verbs or role-play to reinforce everyday vocabulary.

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***Enhanced Vocabulary Acquisition***

Teachers have increasingly recognized the TPR approach as a powerful strategy for boosting vocabulary acquisition in early childhood education. In conversations with foundation phase teachers, it became clear that TPR not only enhances memory retention but also ignites a sense of excitement among young learners.<sup>63</sup> For example, one teacher shared how her learners light up when they act out vocabulary words, like various animals. She observed that this playful interaction leads to remarkable improvements in their recall abilities; many children can confidently name the animals and even mimic their sounds by the following day. This hands-on involvement creates a vibrant and interactive learning environment, helping learners forge meaningful connections between words and actions. As a result, their understanding and retention of new vocabulary flourish.<sup>64</sup>

Teachers are increasingly embracing the TPR approach as an effective way to enhance vocabulary acquisition in early childhood classrooms. They mentioned that TPR not only boosts memory retention but also ignites excitement among young learners.<sup>65</sup> One teacher shared a delightful example: when her learners act out vocabulary words, such as different animals, they become much more engaged in the learning process. She noticed that many kids could easily recall the names of the animals and even imitate their sounds. This active participation transforms vocabulary learning into a fun and lively experience, helping learners connect words with their meanings in a way that truly sticks. This engagement significantly enhances their understanding and retention of new vocabulary.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> A Rokhayati, “Promoting Total Physical Response (TPR) for Young Learners in English Class,” in *The 2nd TEYLIN International Conference Proceedings*, 2017, 75–80.

<sup>64</sup> Khaled Dweikat et al., “Impact of Total Physical Response Method (TPR) on Vocabulary Learning in the Palestinian School Context,” *Journal of English Studies in Arabia Felix* 2, no. 1 (2023): 50–59.

<sup>65</sup> Atik Rokhayani, “Promoting Total Physical Response (TPR) for Young Learners In English Class,” in *Indigenous Norms to the Coming Age of One Asia* (Badan Penerbit Universitas Muria Kudus, 2017), 75–80, <https://doi.org/10.24176/03.3201.09>.

<sup>66</sup> Dweikat et al., “Impact of Total Physical Response Method (TPR) on Vocabulary Learning in the Palestinian School Context.”

## Increased Learner Engagement

The feedback from teachers indicates a significant shift in learner engagement following the adoption of the TPR method. Compared to traditional teaching methods, TPR has made lessons more interactive and enjoyable, resulting in increased participation from all learners.<sup>67</sup> One teacher remarked that learners are now constantly moving, smiling, and eager to take turns acting out words, which was a stark contrast to the previous passive engagement observed in the classroom. This transformation highlights TPR's ability to create a vibrant learning atmosphere where learners feel motivated to actively participate.<sup>68</sup>

Teachers also noted that even the reserved learners became more active since implementing TPR. By facilitating a supportive and energetic environment, TPR encourages shy learners to join in, boosting their confidence and interest in language learning.<sup>69</sup> The atmosphere in the classroom transformed from strict and stiff to vibrant and engaging, creating a strong sense of belonging among the learners. As one teacher noted, the dynamic and interactive approach of TPR resonates with learners who might struggle to stay focused.

## Development of Social Skills

Beyond vocabulary acquisition, TPR has been shown to significantly enhance social skills among young learners. The interactive nature of TPR activities creates plenty of opportunities for children to collaborate and communicate with their peers.<sup>70</sup> For example, during a lesson about animals, one teacher observed learners working in pairs to act out different animals, using gestures and simple phrases. This not only helped them learn new vocabulary but also fostered friendships and teamwork, which are key elements of social development in early childhood.<sup>71</sup>

Teachers have shared numerous examples of how TPR activities encourage learners to support one another, creating a nurturing learning environment. In one instance, learners participated in command games where they motivated each other to jump, clap or sing, helping even the shiest learners become more engaged.<sup>72</sup> These collaborative activities promote vital communication skills, allowing children to express their ideas more freely and build their confidence.

## Application of TPR Strategies in the Classroom

The practical application of TPR strategies in the classroom showcases the creativity and adaptability of foundation phase teachers.<sup>73</sup> Various techniques, such as action songs, storytelling with movements, and command games, are used to make language learning both engaging and effective.<sup>74</sup> For example, one teacher incorporates action songs to teach verbs, allowing learners to act out words like "jump" and "clap." This not only helps with retention but also adds an element of fun to the learning experience. By using a multisensory approach, learners become active participants in their own education rather than just passive recipients of information.<sup>75</sup> Teachers also employ storytelling with physical responses, linking key vocabulary words to specific movements. This strategy keeps learners alert and involved.<sup>76</sup> Additionally,

<sup>67</sup> Yuqi Yang, "Application of Total Physical Response and Songs in the ESL Classroom for Young Learners," *Applied & Educational Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2024): 147–50.

<sup>68</sup> Yang, "Application of Total Physical Response and Songs in the ESL Classroom for Young Learners."

<sup>69</sup> Emily Rebeca Pallo Ayala and Nataly Mishelle Rosero Herrera, "Total Physical Response Method (Tpr) to Teach Vocabulary in 4th-Grade Students in Two Rural Public Schools," 2023.

<sup>70</sup> Wahyu et al., "Enhancing Social Awareness through Total Physical Response (TPR) in Teaching English at Elementary School."

<sup>71</sup> Pahari, "The Implementation of Total Physical Response (TPR) Method in Improving Arabic Speaking Skills."

<sup>72</sup> Vera Savic, "Total Physical Response (TPR) Activities in Teaching English to Young Learners," *Физичка Култура и Модерно Друштво*, *Пос. Изд, Књ 17* (2014): 447–54.

<sup>73</sup> J. C. Richards and T. S. Rodgers, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>74</sup> D. Ummchahyaningrum, "Teaching English to Young Learners through Action Songs, Storytelling, and Command Games," *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Education Innovation (ICEI 2018)* (Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia. Atlantis Press., 2018).

<sup>75</sup> Héctor Renán Córdova Freire, "The Multisensory Method for Teaching the English Language," 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Rodrigo Vargas-Vitoria et al., "Effects of Combined Movement and Storytelling Intervention on Fundamental Motor Skills, Language Development and Physical Activity Level in Children Aged 3 to 6 Years: Study Protocol for a Randomized Controlled Trial," *Children* 10, no. 9 (2023): 1530.

command games like "Simon Says" reinforce vocabulary through direct action, helping learners connect words to their meanings in a playful way.<sup>77</sup> Role-playing real-life scenarios further enhances their practical language skills, allowing learners to practice vocabulary in relevant contexts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings regarding the effectiveness of Total Physical Response (TPR) in enhancing language acquisition and social skills, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Department of Basic Education and School Management should provide enough resources for the effective integration of TPR in ECD classrooms.
2. The Department of Basic Education should provide training to expose teachers to various TPR techniques for them to effectively implement TPR techniques.
3. The integration of TPR in EFAL lessons fosters a collaborative environment for learners, which can enhance both language skills and social development.
4. Implementation of regular assessments to monitor learners' language acquisition and social skills development. This will help in adjusting TPR strategies to meet the specific needs of learners.
5. Ongoing research is recommended to refine and improve TPR practices and outcomes in ECD classrooms.

The thoughtful selection of TPR strategies that align with lesson objectives highlights the effectiveness and enjoyment of this approach, making language learning more meaningful and impactful for young learners.<sup>78</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the influence that the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach has on improving English language vocabulary. The findings revealed that TPR offers a holistic approach to language learning that fosters not just academic growth but also social connections among peers. By nurturing these skills in the ECD classrooms, learners are being prepared not only to succeed in language but also to thrive in their interactions with others, laying a strong foundation for their future learning journeys. Research highlights the transformative power of TPR in language acquisition and social development among young learners. By integrating physical movement with verbal instruction, it not only enhances vocabulary retention but also fosters essential social skills, creating a vibrant and interactive learning environment. Teachers who employ TPR strategies can engage learners more effectively, making learning both enjoyable and memorable. The findings emphasize the importance of active participation in the learning process, showing that when learners feel secure and engaged, their confidence and communication skills flourish.

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<sup>77</sup> L. Shi, "The Use of Total Physical Response (TPR) in Teaching English Vocabulary to Young Learners," *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 9, no. 5 (2018): 1053–61.

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