

Improving Seventh Grade Students' Vocabulary Mastery Through Total Physical Response Method at SMP Negeri 3 Pangsidi

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether the Total Physical Response (TPR) method significantly improved the vocabulary mastery of seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Pangsidi. A quantitative approach with a one-group pre-test and post-test design was used. The population comprised 78 seventh-grade students in the 2025/2026 academic year, and 25 students from Class VII A were selected through purposive sampling. The research instruments were a 20-item multiple-choice vocabulary test and a classroom observation sheet. The test measured word meaning, pronunciation, and vocabulary use, while the observation focused on attention to commands, appropriate physical responses, active participation, and enthusiasm. The treatment was conducted in three instructional meetings through teacher commands, action modeling, repetition, individual and group responses, and simple role reversal. The results showed that the mean score increased from 66.60 on the pre-test to 85.60 on the post-test. The Shapiro-Wilk results indicated that both score distributions were normal, with significance values of 0.080 and 0.067. The paired sample t-test yielded a mean difference of 19.00 points, $t(24) = -5.603$, and $p < 0.001$. Classroom observation also showed that students paid attention, responded physically, participated actively, and demonstrated enthusiasm during TPR activities. These findings indicate that TPR significantly improved students' vocabulary mastery and supported a more active, enjoyable, and low-anxiety learning environment.

Keywords: Total Physical Response; Vocabulary Mastery; Junior High School

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of English language learning because words provide the linguistic resources learners need to understand messages and express ideas. Adequate vocabulary supports listening, speaking, reading, and writing, whereas limited vocabulary makes it difficult for students to follow instructions, comprehend texts, and participate in classroom communication. Nation (2018) places vocabulary at the center of language proficiency, while Schmitt (2019) emphasizes that knowing a word includes knowledge of its meaning, form, and use. Vocabulary instruction at the junior high school level therefore needs to move beyond the memorization of isolated word lists and provide repeated, meaningful opportunities for learners to understand and use words in context.

The need for effective vocabulary instruction was evident among the seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Pangsidi. Preliminary classroom observation indicated that many students had difficulty remembering word meanings, recognizing accurate pronunciation, and using basic vocabulary in simple sentences. Vocabulary instruction tended to rely on teacher explanation and memorization, so students were often passive, easily bored, and reluctant to participate. Such conditions are problematic for early adolescent learners, who generally benefit from concrete, interactive, and contextual learning experiences. Harmer (2021) argues that engaging classroom activity is important for sustaining learner attention and participation, while Ur (2019) explains that vocabulary develops through exposure, repetition, and meaningful use rather than memorization alone.

Total Physical Response offers an alternative method that connects spoken language with physical movement. In TPR, the teacher presents verbal commands and models actions, and learners demonstrate comprehension by responding physically. Speaking is not forced at the beginning; comprehension is allowed to develop before verbal production. Richards and Rodgers (2019) explain that this sequence can make meaning directly accessible through action, while Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2020) note that it can reduce anxiety and provide learners with a supportive transition from listening to speaking. Because action verbs and classroom commands can be demonstrated concretely, TPR is especially suitable for beginner and junior high school learners.

The combination of auditory input, visual demonstration, and kinesthetic response may also strengthen memory. Repeatedly hearing a word while performing its associated action creates multiple pathways for encoding meaning. Alqahtani (2022) reports that TPR can improve vocabulary retention by engaging several learning modalities, and Widodo (2019) found that students taught through TPR achieved stronger vocabulary outcomes than those taught through conventional instruction. Other studies using pre-test and post-test designs have similarly reported significant vocabulary gains and positive classroom participation after

TPR instruction (Rahmawati, 2018; Rahmawati & Fitriani, 2021; Suryani, 2022; Hidayat et al., 2024).

Although previous findings support TPR, its effectiveness needs to be examined in specific classroom settings because student characteristics, instructional time, vocabulary targets, and implementation procedures may differ. The present research focused on seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Pangsid during the 2025/2026 academic year. Vocabulary mastery was examined through three indicators; 1) understanding word meaning, 2) recognizing pronunciation, and 3) selecting vocabulary appropriately in simple contexts. Accordingly, the study addressed the question: Does the Total Physical Response method significantly improve students' vocabulary mastery? The alternative hypothesis stated that students' vocabulary mastery would improve significantly after TPR instruction, whereas the null hypothesis stated that no significant improvement would occur.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Related Study

Previous quantitative studies generally support the use of TPR for vocabulary instruction. Widodo (2019) reported that a TPR group achieved higher post-test vocabulary scores than a conventionally taught group. Rahmawati (2018) found a significant pre-test to post-test increase and argued that physical movement helped students remember words and reduced anxiety. Rahmawati and Fitriani (2021) also found significant improvement through a one-group pre-test and post-test design, with students showing active participation in an enjoyable classroom atmosphere. Suryani (2022) identified a significant effect of TPR, particularly for action verbs, and Hidayat et al. (2024) reported significantly higher post-test achievement among junior high school learners. The present study extends those findings to SMP Negeri 3 Pangsid and integrates vocabulary test results with structured classroom observation. It also examines three specific dimensions of vocabulary mastery meaning, pronunciation, and use after a defined sequence of three TPR meetings. This contextual focus provides evidence regarding whether a short, systematically organized TPR intervention can improve vocabulary mastery among seventh-grade learners in this school setting.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the words learners recognize, understand, and use to communicate meaning. It includes receptive knowledge, which enables learners to understand words in listening and reading, and productive knowledge, which enables them to use words in speaking and writing. Receptive vocabulary generally develops before productive vocabulary because recognition requires less control than accurate production (Nation, 2018). Effective instruction should therefore help learners move gradually from recognizing words to using them confidently. Word knowledge is multidimensional. Nation (2020) describes vocabulary mastery in

terms of form, meaning, and use. Form includes spoken and written features, meaning concerns the concepts and associations represented by words, and use concerns grammatical functions, collocations, and appropriate context. Schmitt (2020) likewise describes vocabulary learning as incremental: a learner may first notice a word, later understand it, and eventually use it appropriately. These perspectives support the repeated practice of the same vocabulary through different forms of classroom activity. In this research, vocabulary mastery was operationalized through three measurable indicators; 1) word meaning referred to the ability to identify the meanings of basic action words and classroom vocabulary, 2) pronunciation referred to the ability to recognize the accurate spoken form of target words, and 3) vocabulary use referred to selecting appropriate words to complete simple commands and sentences. These indicators were appropriate for the participants' level and for the action-based vocabulary taught through TPR.

Total Physical Response

Total Physical Response is a language teaching method in which learners respond to oral language through physical actions. Its central principle is that listening comprehension should develop before learners are expected to speak. The teacher provides clear commands, demonstrates the actions, and allows students to show understanding through movement. When comprehension becomes stable, learners gradually begin to repeat vocabulary, respond verbally, and give commands themselves (Richards & Rodgers, 2019; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2020). Several features make TPR suitable for beginner learners; 1) meaning is conveyed through action rather than lengthy explanation or translation, 2) the combination of language and movement makes abstract verbal input more concrete, 3) repetition occurs naturally because commands can be varied and repeated in different sequences, and 4) learners are not immediately pressured to produce language, which helps establish a low-anxiety learning atmosphere. Cameron (2020) notes that young learners benefit from activity that links language to concrete experience, while Harmer (2021) highlights the motivational value of active and interactive learning. TPR can be implemented through command-based activities, action games, sequence activities, and role reversal. Command-based activity requires students to respond to instructions such as stand up, sit down, open your book, close the door, point, walk, and jump. Action games introduce variation and enjoyment while maintaining repeated exposure. Sequence activities connect several commands in a logical order, and role reversal allows students to give commands after they have demonstrated comprehension. Together, these activities support a gradual transition from receptive understanding to productive vocabulary use.

METHOD

Design and Samples

The study employed a quantitative quasi-experimental approach using a one-group pre-test and post-test design at SMP Negeri 3 Pangsidi during the 2025/2026

academic year. The population consisted of 78 seventh-grade students distributed across three classes: VII A (25 students), VII B (27 students), and VII C (26 students). Purposive sampling was applied to select Class VII A, consisting of 25 students (12 male and 13 female students), because preliminary information indicated relatively low vocabulary mastery and the school permitted the class to participate.

Instrument and Procedure

The primary instrument was a 20-item multiple-choice vocabulary test administered as both the pre-test and post-test. Ten items assessed word meaning, five assessed recognition of correct pronunciation, and five assessed vocabulary use in simple sentences or commands. Each correct response received one point and each incorrect response received zero, with raw scores converted to a scale of 0–100. A classroom observation sheet was used as supporting evidence to record whether students paid attention to teacher commands, responded through appropriate physical actions, participated actively, and showed enthusiasm. Data collection consisted of a pre-test, three treatment meetings involving teacher commands, action modeling, repetition, individual and group responses, and simple role reversal, followed by a post-test.

Data Analysis

The test data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency distribution, percentage, minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation) and inferential statistics. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to examine normality, and a paired sample t-test was conducted to compare pre-test and post-test scores with $\alpha = 0.05$. Observation results were summarized descriptively to support interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The score distribution changed substantially after the three TPR meetings. Before treatment, the students were distributed across all seven achievement categories. One student (4%) was classified as excellent, two (8%) as very good, six (24%) as good, four (16%) as fairly good, five (20%) as fair, five (20%) as poor, and two (8%) as very poor. Thus, seven students (28%) were in the poor or very poor categories, indicating that a substantial part of the class had limited vocabulary mastery before treatment.

Table 1
Distribution of pre-test and post-test classifications

Classification	Pre-test F	Pre-test %	Post-test F	Post-test %
Excellent (96–100)	1	4%	4	16%
Very Good (86–95)	2	8%	6	24%
Good (76–85)	6	24%	8	32%

Fairly Good (66–75)	4	16%	7	28%
Fair (56–65)	5	20%	0	0%
Poor (36–55)	5	20%	0	0%
Very Poor (0–35)	2	8%	0	0%
Total	25	100%	25	100%

After treatment, four students (16%) were classified as excellent, six (24%) as very good, eight (32%) as good, and seven (28%) as fairly good. No student remained in the fair, poor, or very poor categories, and every student obtained a score above 65. The shift toward the upper categories provides an initial indication that the TPR activities contributed to improved vocabulary performance.

The descriptive statistics confirmed the improvement. The pre-test scores ranged from 25 to 100, with a mean of 66.60 and a standard deviation of 19.51. The post-test scores ranged from 70 to 100, with a mean of 85.60 and a standard deviation of 10.03. The average score therefore increased by 19.00 points. The lower post-test standard deviation indicates that the scores became less dispersed, suggesting more consistent achievement across the class after TPR instruction.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of vocabulary scores

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Pre-test	25	25.00	100.00	66.60	19.51
Post-test	25	70.00	100.00	85.60	10.03

The Shapiro-Wilk test was applied before the paired sample t-test. The pre-test significance value was 0.080 and the post-test significance value was 0.067. Both values were greater than 0.05, indicating that the two score distributions met the normality assumption and were appropriate for parametric analysis.

Table 3

Shapiro-Wilk normality test

Variable	Shapiro-Wilk Statistic	df	Sig.
Pre-test	0.929	25	0.080
Post-test	0.925	25	0.067

The paired sample analysis showed a mean difference of -19.00 when the post-test was subtracted from the pre-test. The standard deviation of the difference scores was 16.95 and the standard error was 3.39. The 95% confidence interval for the difference extended from -25.99 to -12.00. The test produced $t = -5.603$ with 24 degrees of freedom and $p < 0.001$. Because the probability value was below 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was accepted. The improvement from the pre-test to the post-test was therefore statistically significant.

Table 4

Paired sample t-test result

Comparison	Mean Diff.	SD	SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	t	df	Sig.
Pre-test – Post-test	-19.00	16.95	3.39	-25.99	-12.00	-5.603	24	<0.001

The classroom observations provided behavioral support for the statistical results. Across the treatment meetings, students paid attention to the commands and generally followed the sequence of activities in an organized manner. They responded with appropriate actions, including standing, sitting, opening books, closing the door, pointing, walking, and jumping. Their correct actions indicated comprehension of the vocabulary presented through teacher commands.

Table 5
Summary of classroom observation results

No.	Observed Aspect	Result
1	Students paid attention to teacher commands	Yes
2	Students responded physically to commands	Yes
3	Students participated actively in TPR activities	Yes
4	Students showed enthusiasm during learning	Yes

Students also participated willingly in individual, group, and game-based activities. Repeated practice appeared to increase their readiness to respond and their confidence in producing simple verbal responses. The atmosphere became more interactive because learners were involved directly through movement rather than only listening to explanation. Attention, physical response, participation, and enthusiasm were recorded positively, indicating that the TPR procedure was implemented as intended.

The results demonstrate that the Total Physical Response method significantly improved the vocabulary mastery of the seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Pangsid. The increase from a mean of 66.60 to 85.60, together with the disappearance of fair, poor, and very poor classifications in the post-test, shows that the improvement was both statistically significant and educationally meaningful. The decrease in score variability also suggests that the method benefited students across different initial levels, not only those who began with stronger vocabulary knowledge.

The improvement can be explained by the way TPR connects language with action. Students did not receive vocabulary only as verbal definitions; they heard commands, observed demonstrations, and performed corresponding movements. This process created a direct relationship among word form, meaning, and use, which reflects Nation's (2020) multidimensional account of vocabulary knowledge. Physical response also allowed learners to demonstrate receptive understanding before being required to produce vocabulary orally, consistent with the comprehension-first principle described by Richards and Rodgers (2019).

Repeated commands across the three meetings likely strengthened retention. During the first meeting, students concentrated on understanding and acting. The second meeting increased variation, repetition, and verbal response. The third meeting reduced teacher modeling and gave students greater independence, including opportunities to give commands. This progression provided repeated exposure while gradually increasing the level of productive demand. Schmitt (2020) explains that vocabulary mastery develops incrementally, and the treatment sequence reflected this movement from recognition toward more confident use.

The improvement in pronunciation was supported by repeated listening and imitation. Students heard the teacher pronounce target vocabulary in meaningful commands and then responded to or repeated the words. Unlike isolated pronunciation drills, the sounds were connected with visible actions, which made the practice contextual. The improvement in vocabulary use was also supported by command sequences and simple classroom contexts. Students were required to select or produce words that matched specific actions, thereby practicing vocabulary functionally rather than as disconnected items.

The positive observation results help explain why the post-test scores improved. Students showed attention, active physical response, participation, and enthusiasm. TPR reduced the passivity identified during the preliminary classroom observation and transformed vocabulary learning into an activity in which every learner had a visible role. A low-anxiety environment is particularly relevant for beginners because fear of making errors can limit participation. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2020) argue that learners should be allowed to build comprehension before speaking, and the present classroom observations suggest that this principle increased confidence and willingness to participate.

The findings are consistent with previous research. Rahmawati (2018) reported significant improvement after TPR treatment and associated movement with stronger memory and lower anxiety. Rahmawati and Fitriani (2021) similarly found significant gains in a one-group pre-test and post-test study. Suryani (2022) found that TPR was effective for action vocabulary, while Hidayat et al. (2024) identified significantly higher post-test scores among junior high school learners. Widodo (2019) also reported stronger achievement for learners taught through TPR than for those receiving conventional instruction. The present study reinforces these findings in the specific context of SMP Negeri 3 Pangsid.

Despite the positive results, the findings should be interpreted within the design of the study. The research involved one class of 25 students, did not include a control group, and implemented treatment over three meetings. The results establish a significant difference between scores before and after TPR in this class, but broader generalization would require larger samples, longer treatment, and comparison groups. Nevertheless, the consistent evidence from score distribution, descriptive statistics, inferential analysis, and classroom observation supports the use of TPR as a practical method for teaching concrete vocabulary to beginning learners.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the Total Physical Response method significantly improved the vocabulary mastery of seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Pangsid. The mean score rose from 66.60 on the pre-test to 85.60 on the post-test, representing a 19-point increase. The paired sample t-test produced $t(24) = -5.603$ and $p < 0.001$, so the null hypothesis was rejected. Post-test classifications also improved: no student remained in the fair, poor, or very poor categories. The findings indicate improvement in understanding word meaning, recognizing pronunciation, and selecting vocabulary appropriately in simple contexts. Classroom observation showed that students paid attention to commands, responded with appropriate physical actions, participated actively, and displayed enthusiasm. TPR therefore functioned not only as a method for increasing test scores but also as an approach for creating an active, enjoyable, and low-anxiety vocabulary learning environment. English teachers may use clear commands, action modeling, systematic repetition, group response, games, and gradual role reversal when teaching concrete vocabulary to beginner learners. Future studies should involve larger and more diverse samples, longer treatment periods, and comparison groups, and may examine the effects of TPR on speaking, listening, or pronunciation development.

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