THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE METHOD IN IMPROVING STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in improving English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' reading comprehension at an Islamic junior high school in Indonesia. Reading comprehension remains a challenging skill for many EFL learners due to limited vocabulary mastery, low motivation, and teacher-centered instructional practices. To address this issue, this study employed a quantitative pre-experimental one-group pre-test and post-test design involving 27 eighth-grade students at MTs Lubbul Labib. Data were collected using a reading comprehension test consisting of 50 multiple-choice items administered before and after the implementation of the TPR method. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 29. The findings reveal a significant improvement in students' reading comprehension after the treatment, indicating that TPR effectively enhances students' ability to understand English texts. The integration of physical movement with language instruction was found to facilitate vocabulary retention, reduce learning anxiety, and increase students' engagement in reading activities. This study contributes to the pedagogical discussion on kinesthetic-based language instruction and provides practical implications for EFL teachers, particularly in junior high school and Islamic school contexts.

Keywords: Total Physical Response, reading comprehension, EFL learners, junior high school, quantitative study

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a fundamental component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it enables learners to access information, develop academic literacy, and succeed across academic disciplines. In many EFL contexts, including Indonesia, reading is emphasized as a core skill in the school curriculum. However, despite its importance, students frequently experience difficulties in comprehending English texts. These difficulties are often caused by limited vocabulary knowledge, lack of motivation, low confidence, and the predominance of teacher-centered instructional approaches that do not actively involve learners in the reading process.

Scholars conceptualize reading comprehension as a complex cognitive activity involving decoding, interpreting, and integrating textual information with readers' prior knowledge and experiences (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). Effective reading comprehension requires readers to identify main ideas, understand vocabulary in context, make inferences, and recognize text structure. Unfortunately, many EFL classrooms still rely on traditional teaching methods, such as translation-based instruction and silent reading followed by comprehension questions. Such approaches may limit students' engagement and result in passive learning, causing reading to be perceived as a difficult and monotonous activity.

Observations conducted at MTs Lubbul Labib revealed that eighth-grade students faced significant challenges in reading comprehension. Students demonstrated low motivation, limited vocabulary mastery, and lack of confidence when dealing with English texts. Moreover, the instructional methods used in reading classes were not sufficiently varied to

accommodate students' learning styles. These conditions highlight the need for alternative teaching methods that actively engage students and create a more supportive learning environment.

One instructional approach that has gained attention in language teaching is Total Physical Response (TPR). Developed by Asher (1977), TPR is based on the coordination of language input with physical movement. The method emphasizes comprehension before production and mirrors first language acquisition, where learners initially respond to verbal input through actions. By integrating physical movement into language instruction, TPR creates a low-anxiety learning environment and encourages active participation.

Previous studies have reported that TPR positively affects students' language learning outcomes, particularly in vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension (Widodo, 2011; Zulfan, 2018). TPR allows learners to associate words with concrete actions, which facilitates memory retention and comprehension. Despite these findings, empirical studies focusing on the implementation of TPR in Islamic junior high school contexts remain limited. Therefore, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response method in improving EFL students' reading comprehension at MTs Lubbul Labib. The study seeks to contribute empirical evidence to support the use of kinesthetic-based instructional methods in EFL reading classrooms.

Literature Review

1 Reading Comprehension in EFL Contexts

Reading comprehension refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and construct meaning from written texts. According to Day and Bamford (2002), reading comprehension involves an interactive process between the reader and the text, where meaning is actively constructed rather than passively received. In EFL contexts, reading comprehension is particularly challenging because learners must process texts written in a language that is not their mother tongue.

Several factors influence EFL students' reading comprehension, including vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, motivation, and reading strategies (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). Vocabulary knowledge plays a crucial role, as limited vocabulary often prevents learners from understanding key ideas in a text. Additionally, lack of exposure to authentic English texts may hinder students' ability to develop effective reading strategies.

2 Total Physical Response (TPR)

Total Physical Response is a language teaching method that emphasizes the coordination of speech and physical movement. Asher (1977) proposed that language learning becomes more effective when learners respond to verbal input through physical actions. TPR is grounded in the theory that comprehension precedes production and that learners should not be forced to speak until they are ready.

TPR creates a low-anxiety learning environment by reducing the pressure on learners to produce language. Instead, learners demonstrate their understanding through actions, which helps build confidence and motivation. Widodo (2011) notes that TPR is particularly suitable for young learners and beginner-level students because it is engaging, memorable, and enjoyable.

3 TPR and Reading Comprehension

The application of TPR in reading instruction has been shown to improve students' comprehension by making reading activities more interactive and meaningful. Physical movements associated with reading tasks help learners internalize vocabulary and sentence meaning, which supports comprehension (Zulfan, 2018). Moreover, TPR encourages active participation and reduces boredom, making reading lessons more enjoyable for students.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that students taught using TPR outperform those taught using traditional methods in reading comprehension tasks. These findings suggest that TPR is an effective instructional strategy for improving reading comprehension, particularly in EFL contexts where students may struggle with motivation and anxiety.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative pre-experimental one-group pre-test and post-test design. The design aimed to measure students' reading comprehension before and after the implementation of the Total Physical Response method. The design can be represented as O_1–X–O_2, where O_1 represents the pre-test, X represents the treatment, and O_2 represents the post-test.

The participants of this study were 27 eighth-grade students at MTs Lubbul Labib. The students were selected using non-probability sampling from a population of 50 students. The participants represented a typical EFL junior high school classroom in an Islamic school context.

The instrument used in this study was a reading comprehension test consisting of 50 multiple-choice items. The test measured students' ability to understand vocabulary in context, identify main ideas, locate detailed information, and make inferences from the text.

The research was conducted in three stages. First, a pre-test was administered to assess students' initial reading comprehension. Second, the treatment was implemented using the Total Physical Response method. During the treatment sessions, the teacher integrated physical movements, gestures, and commands into reading activities to help students understand vocabulary and text meaning. Third, a post-test was administered to measure students' reading comprehension after the treatment.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, and inferential statistics to determine the effectiveness of the TPR method. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 29.

Findings and Discussion

Descriptive Findings of Students' Reading Comprehension

To provide clearer empirical evidence of students' improvement, descriptive statistical data from the pre-test and post-test are presented. The results show a noticeable increase in students' reading comprehension performance after the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method. Table 1 presents a comparison of students' pre-test and post-test scores.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Test Type		Mean	Standard Deviation
Pre-test	27	Moderate–Low	Relatively High
Post-test	27	Moderate–High	Lower than Pre-test

The pre-test results indicate that students' initial reading comprehension ability was relatively low. Many students struggled to understand vocabulary in context, identify main ideas, and draw inferences from the text. The relatively high standard deviation in the pre-test scores suggests that students' reading abilities varied considerably before the treatment.

In contrast, the post-test results demonstrate a clear improvement in students' reading comprehension. The increase in the mean score reflects students' enhanced ability to comprehend English texts after participating in TPR-based instruction. Additionally, the lower standard deviation in the post-test indicates that students' reading performance became more consistent, suggesting that the TPR method benefited not only high-achieving students but also those with lower initial proficiency.

These descriptive findings provide initial evidence that the Total Physical Response method contributed positively to students' reading comprehension development.

The quantitative data obtained from the pre-test and post-test demonstrate a clear improvement in students' reading comprehension after the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method. Prior to the treatment, the pre-test results indicated that most students experienced difficulties in understanding English texts. Common problems included limited vocabulary knowledge, inability to identify main ideas, and difficulty making inferences from the reading passages. These findings reflect typical challenges faced by EFL learners at the junior high school level.

The descriptive statistics revealed that the students' mean score in the pre-test was relatively low, indicating insufficient reading comprehension ability. Many students relied heavily on word-by-word translation and showed limited engagement during reading activities. This condition suggests that traditional instructional practices had not adequately supported students' comprehension development.

After the implementation of the TPR method, the post-test results showed a substantial increase in students' reading comprehension scores. The improvement was observed across several reading sub-skills, including vocabulary understanding, identification of main ideas, and comprehension of detailed information. Students demonstrated better ability to infer meaning from context and to respond accurately to comprehension questions. The increase in mean score indicates that the TPR method had a positive impact on students' overall reading performance.

Inferential Analysis of Pre-test and Post-test Results

Beyond descriptive statistics, inferential analysis was employed to examine whether the difference between pre-test and post-test scores was statistically meaningful. The comparison of students' reading comprehension scores before and after the treatment indicated a significant improvement following the implementation of the Total Physical Response method. This finding confirms that the observed increase in students' reading performance was not merely incidental but can be attributed to the instructional intervention.

The inferential results suggest that the TPR method had a measurable impact on students' reading comprehension achievement. Students demonstrated notable progress in several assessed aspects, including understanding vocabulary in context, identifying main ideas, and comprehending detailed information in reading passages. These improvements indicate that students were better able to process textual meaning holistically rather than relying on isolated word translation.

The consistency of post-test scores also reflects the stabilizing effect of the TPR method on students' learning outcomes. Compared to the pre-test, where students' abilities varied widely, the post-test results showed more homogeneous performance. This suggests that TPR was particularly effective in supporting lower-achieving students, enabling them to reach a level of comprehension closer to that of their peers. Such an outcome is pedagogically important, as it indicates that the method promotes more equitable learning opportunities within the classroom.

Furthermore, the inferential findings reinforce the research hypothesis that the Total Physical Response method is effective in improving EFL students' reading comprehension. The results align with Rutberg and Boukidis (2018), who argue that pre-experimental designs, when systematically applied, are appropriate for measuring instructional effects in educational research. The significant improvement observed in this study provides empirical support for the continued use of TPR as an instructional strategy in EFL reading contexts.

Additional Empirical Insights from Classroom Implementation

In addition to test score analysis, classroom observations conducted during the treatment sessions provided complementary data that help explain the quantitative findings. Throughout the implementation of the TPR method, students showed increased participation and responsiveness during reading activities. Unlike previous lessons, where students tended to remain passive, TPR-based instruction encouraged students to actively engage through physical responses, gestures, and movement-based interaction with the text.

Students appeared more confident when responding to reading-related commands and instructions. This behavioral change suggests that the TPR method successfully reduced students' affective barriers, such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes. As a result, students were more willing to interact with English texts and to demonstrate their understanding through actions. This increased confidence likely contributed to their improved performance in the post-test.

Another important observation was students' improved ability to recall vocabulary items encountered during the reading lessons. By repeatedly associating vocabulary with physical movement, students were able to remember word meanings more effectively. This improvement in vocabulary retention played a crucial role in enhancing overall reading comprehension, as vocabulary knowledge is a key predictor of reading success in EFL contexts (Nation, 2013).

Moreover, the use of TPR appeared to foster a more positive classroom atmosphere. Students expressed enjoyment during the learning process, which helped maintain their attention and motivation. Such positive affective conditions are essential for successful language learning and may explain the sustained improvement observed in students' reading comprehension outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The Role of TPR in Enhancing Reading Comprehension

The findings of this study can be explained through the theoretical principles underlying the Total Physical Response method. One key factor contributing to students' improvement is the integration of physical movement with language input. By associating vocabulary and sentence structures with physical actions, students were able to internalize meaning more

effectively. This process supports Asher's (1977) claim that language comprehension is strengthened when learners respond physically to verbal input.

In addition, the use of TPR reduced students' anxiety during reading activities. Many EFL learners experience fear of making mistakes when dealing with English texts. Through TPR, students were not required to produce immediate verbal responses; instead, they demonstrated understanding through actions. This low-anxiety environment encouraged active participation and increased students' confidence, which positively influenced their reading comprehension.

Another important finding is the increased level of student engagement observed during the treatment sessions. Unlike traditional reading instruction, which often involves silent reading and teacher explanation, TPR-based instruction required students to be physically and mentally involved in the learning process. Students responded enthusiastically to commands, gestures, and movement-based activities related to the reading texts. This active involvement helped maintain students' attention and motivation throughout the lessons.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research highlighting the effectiveness of TPR in language learning. Widodo (2011) emphasizes that TPR is memorable and enjoyable, making it suitable for young and beginner learners. Similarly, Zulfan (2018) reported that TPR significantly improved students' reading comprehension and motivation. The present study extends these findings by providing empirical evidence from an Islamic junior high school context, thereby enriching the existing literature on TPR in EFL reading instruction.

Pedagogical Interpretation of the Findings

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that reading comprehension instruction should not rely solely on cognitive processing but should also incorporate physical and affective dimensions of learning. The success of the TPR method in this study indicates that kinesthetic learning strategies can effectively support comprehension development, particularly for students who struggle with conventional reading instruction.

The improvement in students' reading comprehension also suggests that TPR helps bridge the gap between vocabulary learning and text comprehension. By repeatedly associating words with actions, students were able to recall vocabulary more easily when encountering it in reading texts. This finding supports Grabe and Stoller's (2019) assertion that vocabulary knowledge is a critical factor in reading comprehension.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the Total Physical Response method is not only effective in improving reading comprehension outcomes but also beneficial in creating a positive and engaging learning environment. The method encourages active learning, reduces anxiety, and supports meaningful interaction with texts, making it a valuable instructional strategy for EFL teachers.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in improving EFL students' reading comprehension at MTs Lubbul Labib. The findings revealed a significant improvement in students' reading comprehension after the implementation of the TPR method, as evidenced by higher post-test scores compared to pre-test scores. These results confirm that integrating physical movement with language instruction can positively influence students' ability to understand English texts.

The improvement in reading comprehension can be attributed to several pedagogical advantages of the TPR method. First, the association between language input and physical movement enabled students to internalize vocabulary and sentence meaning more effectively. This finding supports the theoretical assumption proposed by Asher that comprehension is strengthened when learners respond physically to verbal input. Second, the TPR method created a low-anxiety learning environment in which students felt more confident and motivated to engage in reading activities. Reduced anxiety allowed students to focus more on meaning construction rather than fear of making mistakes.

Furthermore, the active and interactive nature of TPR encouraged students to participate more fully in the learning process. Unlike traditional reading instruction, which often positions students as passive recipients of information, TPR required students to be physically and cognitively involved. This active engagement contributed to increased motivation, sustained attention, and deeper comprehension of reading texts. The findings also indicate that TPR helps bridge the gap between vocabulary learning and text comprehension, which is a critical issue in EFL reading instruction.

Overall, the results of this study demonstrate that the Total Physical Response method is not only effective in improving students' reading comprehension outcomes but also beneficial in fostering a positive and engaging classroom atmosphere. By combining cognitive, affective, and kinesthetic dimensions of learning, TPR offers a holistic instructional approach that addresses common challenges faced by EFL learners. Therefore, the implementation of TPR can be considered a valuable pedagogical alternative for English teachers, particularly in junior high school and similar EFL contexts.

SUGGESTIONS

The findings of this study suggest that EFL teachers should consider implementing the TPR method as an alternative instructional strategy in teaching reading comprehension, particularly for junior high school students. TPR can be used to create a more engaging and supportive learning environment that accommodates students' learning styles. Future research is recommended to employ experimental designs with control groups, larger samples, and different educational contexts to further explore the effectiveness of TPR.

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