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# Teaching English Vocabulary to Young Learners through the Total Physical Response Method: A Study at Tien Quang Minh English Language Center

**Nguyen Thi Thanh Hue**

*Faculty of Foreign Languages, Dong Nai Technology University, Dong Nai, Vietnam.*

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**ABSTRACT:** *This is an experimental research about vocabulary teaching and learning at Tien Quang Minh English Language Center (henceforth called TELC) in Bien Hoa City. The research attempts to investigate the effect of the Total Physical Response (TPR) Method on vocabulary retention. It involved sixty two English young learners (YLS) aging from 10 to 11. The quantitative data was obtained through two instruments, namely pre-test and post-test. Descriptive statistics was employed for data analysis. The results revealed that TPR had effect on the YLS' vocabulary knowledge through an increase in their vocabulary retention after they underwent the treatment. This research is expected to shed light to the implementation of teaching vocabulary methods in the TELC context and other similar contexts.*

**Key words:** *vocabulary retention, The Total Physical Response, young learners, TELC context, attitudes*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the globalization era, the demand for learning and using English has been increasing within the last few years in all classes and ages. Most parents agree that the sooner young learners (YLS) learn a second language, the better they will be in language learning (McKay, 2006; Pinter, 2006). Concerning vocabulary acquisition, linguists such as Gu (2003), and Nation (2011) and others have appreciated that the acquisition of vocabulary plays an essential role in the formation of the other skills. Thus, vocabulary always comes high on the list of priorities since YLS started learning English for the first time. Besides, young learners' characteristics is also one of the crucial factors that the teacher would be aware of and take into account in the process of teaching. YLS' concentration levels and attention spans are short, so a variety of activities, pace, and organization are necessary (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, pp. 2-4). Of teaching languages methods, Total Physical Response (TPR), which was put forward by James Asher, is considered to be an appropriate and effective method in introducing and consolidating the English vocabulary to YLS.

### Rationale of the study

Vocabulary retention is considered as one of the major problems for YLS at TELC. YLS at this school have the common characteristics as Slattery and Willis (2001) has described: easily getting bored, losing concentration after a short time of ten minutes learning as well. Besides, some vocabulary teaching methods have been used at the center, such as visual aids, songs, etc., are so familiar, which makes them lose their interest in learning English. Noticeably, the researcher is aware that YLS seem to show a surprising capability of absorbing language through enjoyable physical activities. It is a supporting point for adopting the TPR to teach English vocabulary to YLS, since it is full of movements and presented in the live presentation.

### Research questions

In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, the thesis attempted to address the following research question:

“To what extent does the TPR method enhance young learners' vocabulary retention?”

### Scope of the research

Notwithstanding, this research focuses on the investigation of the effect of TPR on young learners' vocabulary retention. The research was conducted at TELC. The sample of the research was 62 YLS. They were from 10 to 11 years old; and they were divided into two groups with 31 YLs for each: the control group and the experimental group. The present research was conducted with a mixed-methods research design by collecting both quantitative data through the employment of the instruments, including pre-test, post-test.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Definition and Characteristics of Total Physical Response

Asher defined it as a method of teaching a language dealing with "coordination of speech and action" or in detail, a language teaching method using physical movement to response the speech (Asher, 1977, p. 3). Hence, a class full of movement and imperatives drills is a distinctive feature of the TPR method (Richards & Rodgers, 1999). By means of various physical activities, TPR reduces their inhibitions and lower learner effective filter (Richards & Rodgers, 1999). In TPR class, the language development of the learners is natural because the learners' response is physically first and verbally then whereas the teacher does not require their learners to speak unless the learners feel ready. Moreover, TPR focuses on meaning rather than to the form of items. Grammar is thus taught inductively (Richards & Rodgers, 1999). According to Richard and Rodgers (1999), it is imperative drills that play the core activity in TPR. Most of the familiar activities of TPR attach to the teacher's commands toward which young learner respond physically, demonstrating comprehension.

### The effectiveness of TPR in teaching and learning vocabulary to YLs

Regarding the effect of TPR on Teaching Vocabulary to YLs, the first research was conducted by Pujiningsih (2013). It was administered in MI NU Manafiu Ulum Kudus for about seven months. The subject of research was the students of the sixth grade. To collect the data, the researcher used observation notes, diaries, video recording, interview, and tests. The research findings showed that TPR could improve the students' English vocabulary. Also, TPR could increase students' motivation and confidence in learning vocabulary.

Regarding TPR studies conducted in the Vietnamese context, there have been few studies conducted to examine the effectiveness of TPR on teaching English to YLs. Hoang Thi Kim Dung (2013) carried out research to find out the answers for the three main issues: the attitudes of teachers and students towards the teaching and learning vocabulary, the real situation of using TPR activities in teaching vocabulary to children, and the effect of using TPR activities in teaching this language element. Data was collected through one questionnaire in English for the teachers and one Vietnamese questionnaire for the students, and some follow-up interviews. Based on this research, the writer concludes that teaching English vocabulary through TPR is very beneficial for the students, especially for children in order to facilitate them in learning English vocabulary.

One more article was written by Ngo Thi Cam Anh and Pham Vu Phi Ho (2018) about the effect of using the TPR approach in teaching vocabulary to very YLs and exploring the attitudes of YLs towards learning vocabulary using the TPR approach. Nevertheless, he only provided the theoretical background of variations involving the topic, and none methodological method was conducted to measure the effectiveness.

Obviously, gaps are found in the literature relating to the application of TPR method in Vietnam context. Besides, although these numerous empirical studies have been demonstrated the positive influence of TPR on YLs' vocabulary retention, most of the studies were conducted in an EFL and ESL setting in which the participants were elementary learners at the same age in a classroom at a formal school, little research has focused on a class of YLs aged from 10 to 11 years old at a language center. To fill these gaps, the current

research aims to investigate the effect of TPR in teaching English vocabulary to YLs aging 10-11 at TELC language.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### The research settings

Tien Quang Minh English Language Center (TELC) is located in the center of Bien Hoa City. It is one of the top language centers in Bien Hoa city with a huge number of learners attending its English courses. The center offers various classes to accommodate the need of different students.

#### Research Design

The present research was conducted with a mixed-methods research design by collecting quantitative data through the employment of the instruments, including pre-tests, post-test. Concerning the quantitative data, this specific research was based mainly on a quasi-experimental involving two groups (control and experimental) and employed tests taken the form of "non-equivalent groups pretest-posttest design."

#### Population and Sample

In the case of TELC, the total number of learners was 250. Among them, 73 YLs aged from 6 to 11 years old were attending the elementary English course at TELC.

The participants in the present research consisted of 62 YLs (39 males and 23 females). They are ten-year-old and eleven-year-old students from various primary schools in Bien Hoa city. They all have learned English for two years with the same level of cognitive capacity. The YLs were divided into two classes Smart Choice 1A (control group) and Smart Choice 1B (experimental group); each class had the consistent number of 31 YLs.

#### Data collection instruments

#### Tests

To investigate the effect of TPR on YLs' vocabulary retention, the quasi-experimental design was used involving two groups (control and experimental) and employing pretest and posttest. For clearer description, the design could be seen in the table below:

**TABLE 1. EXPERIMENT DESIGN DESCRIPTION OF TESTS**

Control Group	Pre-test	X (Treatment with GTM)	Post-test
Experimental Group	Pre-test	X (treatment with TPR method)	Post-test

The pre-test and post-test were employed to get the score of the participants before and after teaching. The pre-test and the post-test were designed to be similar to each other in terms of content, task types, allotted time, and numbers of the tasks.

#### The analysis of test

The data collected from pre-test and post-test would be analyzed with SPSS program. The pre-test and post-test mean scores were calculated to identify the advancement in students reading. The t-test of dependent samples was also calculated to identify the significant differences between the mean scores of pre-test and post-test.

#### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

##### The pre-test scores

**TABLE 2. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE MEAN SCORES OF PRE-TEST RESULTS OF THE TWO GROUPS**

Groups of Students	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control	31	2.661	.8411
Experimental	31	2.399	1.1589

The findings of pretest measurement using independent T-test consisted of the findings from group statistics and from independent samples test. The result of pre-test from group statistics consists of the number of participants, the mean of the score, standard deviation, and standard error mean. With the results shown in Table 2, the total mean score of the control group (M=2.661) and that of the experimental group (M = 2.399) were just above the average on the scale of "1 as minimum" to "10 as maximum" which indicates that before the treatment, the participants did not know much about these vocabularies.

**TABLE 3. COMPARATIVE RESULTS OF THE MEAN SCORES OF THE PRE-TEST RESULTS OF THE TWO GROUPS**

Pre-test	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.984	.164	1.019	60	.312	.262097	.257196	-.252371	.776565
Equal variances not assumed			1.019	54.740	.313	.262097	.257196	-.253390	.777583

Table 3 shows the mean difference between two groups (MD= .262097) was very low. It highlights that the two groups had the same initial level of English vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, the results in the Independent Sample t-test signify that the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances is non-significant. The Sig (2-tailed) value as .313 was much higher than .05 (level of significance). The finding implies that before the treatment, the levels of vocabulary learning of two groups were not significantly different. In other words, it can be concluded that the homogeneity of the two groups in terms of vocabulary competence was established at the beginning of the experiment.

##### The post-test scores

##### The comparison of the mean scores of vocabulary post-test results between the control group and the experimental group after the treatment.

The post-test was designed to measure English vocabulary retention after the treatment in the study. This post-test was a self-constructed test, and it had the same format as the pre-test.

**TABLE 4. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE MEAN SCORES OF THE CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUP IN THE POST-TEST**

Groups of Students	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control	31	5.637	1.3641
Experimental	31	6.620	1.0808

**TABLE 5. COMPARATIVE RESULTS OF THE MEAN SCORES OF CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUP IN THE POST-TEST**

Post-test	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.861	.357	-3.148	60	.003	-.983871	.312585	-1.609135	-.358607
Equal variances not assumed			-3.148	57.019	.003	<b>-.983871</b>	.312585	-1.609808	-.357934

The findings show that the mean difference among groups on the post-test was statistically significant. With the results shown in Table 4.3, after the treatment, the total mean score of the vocabulary test of the experimental group (M=6.620) was very much higher than that of the control group (M = 5.637) with the mean difference between two groups (MD= .983871). In addition, an Independent Samples T-test was also conducted to evaluate whether there is a significant difference between two groups in the English vocabulary knowledge after the treatment. The results in Table 4.4 signify that the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances is statistically significant. The Sig. (2-tailed) value is .003 (< .005) which indicates that after the treatment, the participants' English vocabulary knowledge between two groups was significantly different: the level English vocabulary retention of the experimental group was greater than that of the control group.

#### The comparison between the results of pre-test and post-test within each group.

To compare the mean scores of the participants' English vocabulary retention within the control group and the experimental group before and after the treatment, the researcher run the Descriptive Statistics and Paired-Samples T-test to gain the participants' performance. The results were reported as follows:

**TABLE 6. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE MEAN SCORES WITHIN THE CONTROL GROUP AND THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP BEFORE AND AFTER THE TREATMENT**

Groups of Students	Tests	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control	Pre-test	31	2.661	.8411
	Post-test	31	5.637	1.3641
Experimental	Pre-test	31	2.399	1.1589
	Post-test	31	6.620	1.0808

**TABLE 7. COMPARATIVE RESULTS OF THE MEAN SCORES WITHIN EACH GROUP IN THE PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST**

The control group (A)	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pre-test - Post-test	-2.975806	.918796	.165021	-3.312824	-2.638789	-18.033	30	.000

The experimental group (B)	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pre-test - Post-test	-4.221774	.468497	.084145	-4.393620	-4.049928	-50.173	30	.000

From these two tests, it can be shown that after the treatment, both different treatment conditions' performance, the control group, and the experimental group, on vocabulary retention increased from the pre-test to the post-test. Concretely, for the control group, the mean score increased from the pre-test ( $M = 2.661$ ) to the post-test ( $M = 5.637$ ) with the mean difference ( $MD = 2.975806$ ). Furthermore, Sig. (2-tailed) Value as .000 indicates there was a significant difference between the participants in the control group before and after the treatment. For the experimental group, the mean score creased from the pre-test ( $M = 2.399$ ) to the post-test ( $M = 6.620$ ) with the mean difference ( $MD = 4.221774$ ). Moreover, Sig. (2-tailed) value as .000 revealed that there was a significant difference in the participants in the experimental group before and after the treatment.

However, when considering the values of the mean difference between the control group and the experimental group, it can be observed that the mean score of the experimental group was much greater than that of the control group after the treatment. In other words, the mean score of the experimental group was significantly developed after the treatment.

In conclusion, the findings of the study proved that using the TPR Method to teach English vocabulary to young learners actually had great effect on YLs' vocabulary retention. The method may facilitate YLs to develop and memorize their English vocabulary more easily and longer than traditional methods.

### Discussion

Regarding the YLs' vocabulary retention, the comparative results of the pre-test and post-test have indicated that TPR made progress in the YLs' vocabulary knowledge. Especially, when comparing the results of two groups in the post-test with the purpose of testing the YLs' ability of word meanings memorization after four weeks of the treatment, it has been discovered that the mean score of the experimental group is 7.76, while the mean score of the control group is 6.58, which revealed that the YLs in the experimental group could memorize the meanings of words better and longer than the control group. In other words, YLs who were treated by TPR had a better performance on vocabulary retention.

### Limitations and recommendations for further research

Although the research has reached its aims, there are still some unavoidable limitations.

First of all, the time of conducting the training experiment in this research was limited. This research was conducted within only a month, which means in total in four weeks, with 16 forty-five periods. Therefore, if the research would be conducted with longer time, it would be desirable to yield more generalizable findings.

The second limitation lies within the teachers' practice, perception, and own approach in teaching the English Language. That is to say, not all the activities relating to TPR were taught during the treatment.

The following limitation is due to the shortage of time and the small scale of the thesis, not all YLs of this age range get involved in this research. The age range only focuses on those between ten and eleven.

Further studies should overcome the mentioned limitations in this research. First, they may be conducted in a longer time with the larger participants at different levels. Secondly, the research scope of this research is at an English language center in Vietnam, while further research can be conducted in other contexts like Vietnamese primary schools. In addition, the age range can also be wider from six to twelve. Moreover, this research looks at the effect of TPR on vocabulary retention. Future studies can be on the effect of other English skills or English elements such as listening, speaking, or grammar.

## V. CONCLUSION

The results of this research have indicated that YLs' vocabulary retention could be enhanced by TPR. It was proven by the better performance in the post-test of the experiment group in comparison with the control group. In other words, after treated with TPR, the YLs' vocabulary retention has been improved, which to motivate them to be ready and have self-confident in learning English at a higher level of education.

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