

Total Physical Response (Tpr) In Teaching Vocabulary To A Slow Learner: A Narrative Inquiry Of A Seventh Grade Teacher

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ABSTRACT

This study explored an English teacher's experience implementing Total Physical Response (TPR) to enhance vocabulary mastery for slow learners in a seventh-grade inclusive class at SMP Muhammadiyah 02 Medan, addressing the need for effective teaching strategies beyond traditional methods. Using a narrative inquiry approach, data were collected from one teacher with eight years of experience and one slow learner student through interviews, classroom observations, reflective notes, and supporting documentation, then analyzed via transcription, restorying, and thematic coding. Findings show that TPR significantly improves students' ability to understand, retain, and use vocabulary by linking words with physical movements, increasing slow learners' confidence, active participation, and vocabulary retention while fostering a more inclusive, interactive classroom environment. Effective teacher strategies included repeated instructions, simplified steps, and direct demonstration. It is recommended that teachers consistently apply TPR, schools support active learning strategies, and future researchers explore integrating TPR with other teaching methods in inclusive classroom contexts.

Keywords: Total Physical Response (TPR), Narrative Inquiry, Slow Learner Students, Vocabulary Mastery, Inclusive Classroom

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi pengalaman guru bahasa Inggris dalam menerapkan metode Total Physical Response (TPR) untuk meningkatkan penguasaan kosakata siswa slow learner di kelas inklusif tingkat tujuh SMP Muhammadiyah 02 Medan, menjawab kebutuhan strategi pengajaran yang efektif di luar metode tradisional. Menggunakan pendekatan narrative inquiry, data dikumpulkan dari satu guru dengan delapan tahun pengalaman dan satu siswa slow learner melalui wawancara naratif, observasi kelas, catatan reflektif, dan dokumentasi pendukung, kemudian dianalisis melalui transkripsi, restorying, dan thematic coding. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa TPR secara signifikan meningkatkan kemampuan siswa memahami, mengingat, dan menggunakan kosakata dengan menghubungkan kata dan gerakan fisik, meningkatkan kepercayaan diri, keterlibatan aktif, dan daya ingat kosakata siswa slow learner, serta menciptakan kelas yang lebih inklusif dan interaktif. Strategi guru yang efektif meliputi pengulangan instruksi, penyederhanaan langkah, dan demonstrasi langsung. Disarankan agar guru konsisten menerapkan TPR, sekolah mendukung pembelajaran aktif, dan peneliti selanjutnya mengkaji integrasi TPR dengan metode lain dalam kelas inklusif.

Kata Kunci: Total Physical Response (TPR), Narrative Inquiry, Siswa Slow Learner, Penguasaan Kosakata, Kelas Inklusif

A. Introduction

English language learning at the junior high school level requires teachers to address the diverse characteristics of students in the classroom. Differences in abilities, learning styles, and speed of comprehension present real challenges, particularly in the context of an inclusive class. In practice, a teacher may teach one student identified as a slow learner among the majority of regular students. This situation is not merely a matter of teaching strategies, but also concerns how the teacher experiences, interprets, and reflects on the teaching process in such diverse conditions.

In English language teaching, these challenges become more complex because vocabulary and language structures are often abstract and unfamiliar to students. For slow learners, difficulties may arise in understanding new vocabulary, remembering word meanings, following oral instructions, and adjusting to the pace of classroom learning. This condition requires teachers to continuously adjust the way they deliver material, manage the class, and provide additional support. Therefore, the focus is not only on how students learn, but also on how the teacher's experience is shaped within the dynamics of the inclusive class (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

One approach that can be used in teaching vocabulary is the Total Physical Response (TPR), introduced by Asher (1972). TPR combines verbal instructions with physical movement, allowing students to respond to language through actions. This approach is considered effective in reducing the abstract nature of vocabulary learning and supporting comprehension through multisensory engagement (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). For slow learners, structured and repeated physical demonstration can help clarify meaning and strengthen memory retention. Slow learners are defined as learners with below-average intellectual ability (IQ 70–90) who face difficulty following lessons at regular speed and require repetition, visual support, and concrete methods to understand material (Amelia, 2016).

This study was conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 02 Medan, particularly in the seventh grade. The research participant was one English teacher with eight years of teaching experience who taught in a class where the majority of students were regular students and one student was identified as a slow learner. In this context, the teacher faced dual responsibilities: ensuring the participation of regular students while providing special attention to the slow

learner. The implementation of TPR required the teacher to regulate the learning pace, simplify and repeat instructions, provide additional support, and maintain balanced classroom interaction. This process often required continuous reflection and adjustment (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Dewey, 1985).

Several previous studies have examined the implementation of TPR in English language teaching but with different focuses. Dzurrotul Ilmi and Anwar (2022) studied students' perceptions of TPR at Ban Nonsawan School, Thailand, without exploring the teacher's experience in an inclusive class. Riyanti and Rustipa (2024) investigated TPR at kindergarten level without examining teacher reflection or slow learner management. Harida (2013) explored TPR combined with the Taboo game for young learners but did not address teacher experience with slow learners. Rahman et al. (2025) analyzed vocabulary teaching strategies at elementary school without exploring narrative teacher experience with slow learners in inclusive classes.

Based on these studies, prior research mainly focuses on learning results, students' perceptions, or teaching techniques with very limited attention to the teacher's narrative experience in implementing TPR for slow learners in an inclusive class at the junior high school level. Therefore, this study addresses that gap by exploring: (1) how the teacher adapts TPR to support vocabulary mastery for slow learners; and (2) how the teacher overcomes challenges in implementing TPR in an inclusive seventh-grade class at SMP Muhammadiyah 02 Medan.

B. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with narrative inquiry as the research design. Narrative inquiry is appropriate for exploring how individuals interpret experiences, construct meaning from classroom events, and reflect on professional practices through personal stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This method allows the study to capture the contextual and experiential dimensions of teaching that cannot be measured solely through quantitative assessments or student learning outcomes.

The research was conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 02 Medan, a private junior high school that applies an inclusive class system established in 1978. The school was selected because the researcher had previously conducted a teaching practicum (PPL) at the school, enabling direct observation of the English teaching and learning process in the seventh grade. Participants

were selected using purposive sampling based on direct involvement with the phenomenon. The study involved one English teacher as the primary participant, who had approximately eight years of teaching experience at the school since 2015, and one slow learner student as the supporting participant.

Data were collected through four techniques: (1) narrative interviews with the teacher to explore her experiences, challenges, and reflections on TPR implementation; (2) classroom observations to document teaching practices and student responses directly; (3) reflective notes and researcher's field notes recorded during and after classroom visits; and (4) supporting documentation including lesson plans, photographs, and official school documents. Data analysis followed the narrative inquiry framework through transcription, restorying, and thematic coding. Data trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, prolonged engagement, and peer debriefing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

C. Result and Discussion

The study explored the narrative experience of an English teacher in implementing the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in a seventh-grade inclusive classroom at SMP Muhammadiyah 02 Medan. Data collected through observations, narrative interviews, and reflective notes revealed five key findings as discussed below.

1. Use of TPR in Teaching

The teacher relies on TPR as her primary method in teaching English vocabulary, linking each vocabulary item with physical movements. Since starting at the school, she found TPR particularly effective in helping students with learning difficulties remember vocabulary more easily. The method is especially beneficial for action verbs such as "stand," "sit," "run," and "jump." The teacher stated: "I feel that with TPR, students are not just listening but also performing the actions. For example, when I teach the word 'stand,' I will stand up and ask them to mimic the action. This helps them remember the words more easily. Especially for slow learners, they can grasp the vocabulary I teach much better." This confirms Asher's (1972) principle that language learning is most effective when comprehension precedes production and learners respond physically to teacher commands. Repetition and variation in movements are also used to maintain engagement, considering the attention limitations of slow learners.

2. Challenges in Teaching and Adapting the Method

The main challenge the teacher faces is the slower learning pace of slow learners compared to regular students. Slow learners often need more time to understand vocabulary or instructions even after several repetitions. To overcome this, the teacher adapts TPR by extending the time given to slow learners and simplifying instructions into smaller, easier-to-follow steps rather than long complex commands. The teacher reflected: "Slow learners do take longer to follow instructions. For example, when I say 'stand,' she sometimes gets confused, so I have to repeat it more often. I also break it down into smaller steps so she can follow it more easily." This adaptation aligns with Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), who emphasize that inclusive pedagogy requires responsive and continuous adaptation to student diversity. Balancing attention between the slow learner and regular students simultaneously required careful orchestration of classroom activities.

3. Impact of TPR on Slow Learners

Using TPR had a significant positive impact on the slow learner's vocabulary mastery. After several TPR-based lessons, the slow learner began participating more confidently and appeared more active. Vocabulary items previously difficult to master, such as "jump" or "run," became easier to remember because the student not only heard but also physically performed the corresponding actions. The teacher observed: "After several TPR lessons, I've seen slow learners become more active and confident. Vocabulary that they previously struggled to remember is now easier for them because they also move with the words." This finding supports Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) that multisensory engagement strengthens understanding and memory retention, and Amelia (2016) that slow learners benefit substantially from concrete, repetitive, and movement-based methods.

4. Strategies for Handling Students with Special Needs

In addition to slow learners, the teacher also accommodates students with attention difficulties. She primarily uses an individual approach by providing direct attention, simplified instructions, and extended practice time for students who need it. The teacher relies on modeling and repetition as key strategies: demonstrating the movement first before asking students to imitate, which is particularly effective for students with attention difficulties who respond better to visual and physical cues than verbal instructions alone. The

teacher noted: "I don't create small groups, but I give more attention to students who need it, by repeating instructions and giving them more time. Students with attention issues follow more easily if they can see me demonstrate the movement first, then they imitate it." This tacit knowledge, derived from years of direct teaching experience, guided the teacher in selecting appropriate gestures, pacing activities, and anticipating potential misunderstandings (Schön, 1987).

5. Impact of TPR on the Classroom Environment

TPR positively impacted not only the slow learner's individual performance but also the overall classroom environment. By using TPR, the class became more dynamic and interactive. Regular students who were previously passive also became more involved. The classroom atmosphere became more lively and enjoyable when all students were moving and engaging in physical activities. The teacher observed that TPR creates a more inclusive environment where all students, regardless of ability, can participate in their own way. This increased learning motivation for all students in the class, suggesting that TPR is an inclusive strategy supporting multiple learner profiles simultaneously, consistent with findings by Dzurotul Ilmi and Anwar (2022) and Riyanti and Rustipa (2024) on student engagement.

Compared to previous studies, this research extends the literature by focusing on the teacher's narrative experience, reflective practice, and adaptive strategies—dimensions that studies by Harida (2013), Dzurotul Ilmi and Anwar (2022), and Rahman et al. (2025) did not address. The findings demonstrate that effective TPR implementation requires more than procedural adherence; it demands flexibility, reflective practice, and the integration of experiential tacit knowledge within the context of an inclusive classroom.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study explored the narrative experience of a seventh-grade English teacher implementing TPR in an inclusive classroom at SMP Muhammadiyah 02 Medan. The findings confirm that TPR effectively supports vocabulary acquisition for slow learners by combining verbal instructions with physical actions, reducing abstractness, and enhancing memory retention. The teacher's adaptive strategies—adjusting learning pace, simplifying instructions, and providing repeated demonstrations—highlight the critical role of reflective practice and tacit knowledge in inclusive pedagogy. TPR also

fostered a more inclusive and interactive classroom environment that benefited all students. These results demonstrate that TPR is not only a methodological tool but also a context-dependent approach requiring teacher flexibility and responsiveness to student diversity.

For future research, it is recommended to investigate the integration of TPR with complementary approaches such as gamification, storytelling, or technology-assisted instruction in inclusive classroom settings. Studies involving multiple teachers across different schools and grade levels would provide broader insights for generalization. Teacher training programs should also incorporate narrative reflection and adaptive strategies to strengthen inclusive teaching competencies. Additionally, future researchers are encouraged to examine students' perceptions and attitudes toward TPR to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its effectiveness for diverse learners.

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