



A Qualitative Study on the Implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) Method in Enhancing Students' Speaking Ability in Narrative Texts

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is an essential skill in language learning that enables students to communicate ideas, express opinions, and engage in meaningful interactions. However, many students still experience difficulties in speaking English, particularly in terms of fluency, pronunciation, and confidence. Preliminary observation showed that only 6 out of 28 students (21%) were able to respond to questions in English without using translation tools, indicating a low level of speaking proficiency. This study aims to explore the use of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in improving students' speaking skills in narrative texts. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of students' learning experiences during the implementation of TPR. The data were collected through classroom observations and interviews, focusing on students' participation, fluency, pronunciation, and comprehension of narrative texts. The findings revealed that the implementation of the TPR method increased students' engagement, with approximately 75% of students actively participating in speaking activities. In addition, students showed improvement in confidence, pronunciation accuracy, and fluency. The TPR method also helped reduce students' anxiety when speaking English. Therefore, TPR is considered an effective teaching strategy for improving students' speaking skills.

Keywords: Total Physical Response Method, Students' Speaking Ability, Narrative Text, Classroom Interaction



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1. Introduction

English is widely recognized as an international language that plays a significant role in various aspects of modern life, including education, science, technology, business, and global communication. As globalization continues to expand, English functions as a lingua franca that enables people from diverse linguistic backgrounds to communicate effectively. In this context, English proficiency has become an essential skill for students to access global knowledge and participate in international communication (Rose et al., 2020; Galloway & Numajiri, 2020; Crystal, 2003).

In Indonesia, English language learning has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from merely a formal subject into a crucial life skill for social and economic mobility. The current curriculum emphasizes communicative competence and encourages students to use English to access global information and digital technology. This condition is closely related to Indonesia's position in the "Expanding Circle" of English use,

where English serves as a foreign language but plays an important role in global interaction (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Proficiency in English is built upon four fundamental skills, they are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening and reading are categorized as receptive skills, while speaking and writing are productive skills that require active language production (Richards & Renandya, 2002; Brown, 2015). A balance between input and output is essential to achieve communicative competence in today's global communication era. Among these skills, speaking is considered the most essential because it enables learners to express ideas, share opinions, and interact in real-life communication (Kayi, 2006; Idris, 2016). Speaking is not only about producing language but also about constructing and conveying meaning through verbal and non-verbal communication in various contexts (Luoma, 2004). It involves several components, including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and discourse management (Thornbury, 2005).

However, in practice, many students experience difficulties in mastering speaking skills. These difficulties include limited vocabulary, lack of grammatical understanding, poor pronunciation, and low confidence (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017; Wahyuni & Utami, 2021). In addition, psychological factors such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes significantly hinder students' willingness to speak (Horwitz et al., 1986). As a result, students often remain passive during classroom interaction.

Based on preliminary observations, it was found that only 6 out of 28 students (21%) were able to respond to questions in English without relying on translation tools. This indicates that students' speaking proficiency is still relatively low and needs to be improved through more effective teaching strategies. These difficulties are influenced by both internal and external factors. From the students' perspective, lack of confidence and limited exposure to English reduce their speaking performance. From the teachers' perspective, teaching methods often focus more on grammatical accuracy than meaningful communication, resulting in limited opportunities for students to practice speaking in authentic contexts (Harmer, 2007).

To overcome these challenges, innovative and interactive teaching methods are required. One such method is the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, developed by Asher (2009). TPR integrates language learning with physical movement, allowing students to respond to commands through actions before producing spoken language. This approach supports natural language acquisition and reduces anxiety (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). In addition, the use of TPR aligns with modern pedagogical approaches that emphasize student engagement and active learning. Effective teaching methods should not only deliver content but also create meaningful learning experiences that support both cognitive and emotional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

The implementation of TPR is particularly relevant in teaching narrative texts. Narrative texts aim to tell stories with a structured sequence, including orientation, complication, and resolution (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). Through TPR, students can physically act out story events before retelling them orally, which helps them understand the storyline and improves their speaking fluency. Previous studies have shown that the TPR method can improve students' speaking ability, increase participation, and reduce anxiety (Putri et al., 2022; Sari & Prasetyo, 2020; Tarigan, Nasution & Hasibuan, 2025). The method encourages students to actively engage in learning through physical and verbal responses, making the learning process more interactive and enjoyable. Despite its potential, studies focusing on the implementation of TPR in improving students' speaking skills in narrative texts, particularly in Indonesian EFL contexts, are still limited. Most previous studies focus only on general speaking improvement without exploring narrative-based speaking activities.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in improving students' speaking skills in narrative texts. Specifically, this study investigates its impact on students' fluency, pronunciation, and comprehension, as well as their participation during the learning process.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in improving students' speaking skills in narrative texts. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of human behaviour,

perceptions, and experiences within a specific educational context (Creswell, 2014; Boulton & Houghton, 2021). The focus of this study is to describe the activities of teachers and students during the teaching and learning process using the TPR method.

The research was conducted in a junior high school in Medan, involving ninth-grade students as the research subjects. A total of 28 students participated in this study. The participants were selected because they had learned narrative texts and were considered appropriate for observing speaking performance. In this study, the researcher acted as the primary instrument, directly observing classroom interactions and identifying students' speaking difficulties, such as fear of making mistakes and limited vocabulary. The main variable in this study is the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, which integrates language learning with physical movement. Through this method, students are encouraged to respond to verbal instructions with physical actions before producing spoken language. This approach is particularly relevant in teaching narrative texts, where students are guided to understand and retell story plots consisting of orientation, complication, and resolution.

Data collection techniques were carried out using three main instruments: observation, interviews, and documentation. Classroom observation was conducted to directly examine the teaching and learning process, particularly students' participation and responses during the implementation of the TPR method. Initial observation indicated that only 6 out of 28 students (21%) were able to respond to the teacher's questions in English without using a digital dictionary. Interviews were conducted with selected students and the teacher to explore their perceptions, experiences, and challenges in speaking English. The interviews aimed to gain deeper insights into factors affecting students' speaking performance and the effectiveness of the TPR method in reducing anxiety and improving confidence. In addition, documentation such as lesson plans (RPP), teaching materials, and students' performance records was analysed to support and strengthen the findings.

The data were analysed qualitatively by referring to the components of speaking skills, including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, discourse management, and interactive communication (Thornbury, 2005). The analysis focused on how the TPR method facilitates students in expressing ideas by physically acting out narrative events before delivering them orally. This process helps students build confidence and improve fluency in speaking. Furthermore, the data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, relevant data were selected and categorized. In the data display stage, the data were organized into descriptive forms to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the patterns and findings obtained from the analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

This study aims to explore the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in improving students' speaking skills in narrative texts. The findings were obtained through classroom observations, interviews, and documentation. The results focus on students' speaking performance, including fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, discourse management, and participation. To provide a clearer overview of the findings, students' speaking performance after the implementation of the TPR method is presented in the following table:

Table 1. Students' Speaking Performance after TPR Implementation

No	Speaking Aspect	Description	Percent age
1	Fluency	Ability to speak smoothly with fewer pauses	72%
2	Pronunciation	Ability to pronounce words clearly and correctly	68%
3	Comprehension	Understanding of narrative content and responding appropriately	75%
4	Participation	Active involvement in speaking activities	78%

Based on Table 1, the highest improvement was found in student participation (78%). This indicates that the TPR method successfully transformed the classroom atmosphere from passive to active. Previously, students tended to remain silent, but after the implementation of TPR, they became more engaged in learning activities. The initial condition of students' speaking ability was relatively low, as only 6 out of 28 students

(21%) were able to respond to the teacher's questions in English without using translation tools. This finding indicates a gap between curriculum expectations and actual classroom practice. Students' anxiety and fear of making mistakes were the main factors contributing to their low participation. The implementation of the TPR method helped reduce students' anxiety by creating a more interactive and enjoyable learning environment. Through physical movement, students were encouraged to participate without the pressure of speaking perfectly. This supports the idea that physical engagement can lower students' affective filters and increase confidence in language learning.

In terms of comprehension (75%), students demonstrated a better understanding of narrative texts. The use of physical actions allowed them to visualize story elements such as orientation, complication, and resolution. As a result, students were able to retell stories more effectively and logically. Vocabulary development also showed improvement. Students found it easier to remember action verbs and expressions after practicing them physically. This indicates that the TPR method supports memory retention through sensorimotor engagement, which helps students recall vocabulary more easily during speaking activities. Fluency (72%) improved as students became more confident in expressing their ideas. Initially, students hesitated and paused frequently, but after repeated TPR activities, they were able to speak more smoothly. This suggests that repeated exposure and practice through physical interaction can enhance fluency. Pronunciation (68%) also improved, although it remained the lowest among the aspects. Students benefited from listening to repeated instructions before producing speech. This process allowed them to internalize correct pronunciation patterns gradually. Another important aspect observed in this study is discourse management. Students were able to organize narrative events more logically after participating in TPR activities. By acting out the storyline, they could better understand the sequence of events, which improved their ability to deliver coherent narratives.

Despite these improvements, some challenges remained. Students still faced difficulties in using grammatical structures, particularly in applying the past tense consistently when retelling narratives. This indicates that while TPR is effective in improving fluency and confidence, it needs to be combined with other strategies to enhance grammatical accuracy. The success of the TPR method is also influenced by internal and external factors. Internal factors include students' motivation, confidence, and prior knowledge, while external factors include teaching strategies, classroom environment, and teacher support. To support the findings, the data collection techniques used in this study are summarized in the following table:

Table 2. Data Collection Techniques

Technique	Description of Activities	Purpose / Data Generated
Observation	Observing classroom interaction and TPR implementation	Identifying student participation and speaking behavior
Interview	Conducting in-depth interviews with students and teacher	Exploring perceptions, difficulties, and experiences
Documentation	Collecting lesson plans and student learning records	Supporting analysis of narrative structure and learning outcomes

The findings of this study indicate that the TPR method plays a significant role in improving students' speaking skills. It not only enhances participation and comprehension but also creates a positive learning environment that encourages students to speak more confidently. From a pedagogical perspective, the use of TPR shifts the teacher's role from a knowledge transmitter to a facilitator who supports student-centered learning. This approach aligns with the findings of Nasution and Tarigan (2024), who argue that the Total Physical Response (TPR) method contributes to the development of language skills and other competencies by integrating physical movement with learning activities within a multiple intelligences framework. In conclusion, this study confirms that the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method has a significant positive impact on students' speaking ability in narrative texts. The integration of physical movement, comprehension, and oral expression provides an effective strategy for developing students' communicative competence in English.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method has a significant positive impact on students' speaking skills in narrative texts. The results indicate that students' initial speaking ability was relatively low, as only 6 out of 28 students (21%)

were able to respond to the teacher's questions in English without relying on translation tools. This condition reflects the gap between the expected communicative competence and the actual classroom performance.

After the implementation of the TPR method, students showed notable improvement in several aspects of speaking, including participation, comprehension, fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary. The method successfully created a more interactive and engaging learning environment, encouraging students to actively participate in speaking activities. In addition, the use of physical movement helped students better understand narrative structures and improved their ability to express ideas more confidently. However, some challenges were still found, particularly in the use of grammatical structures such as past tense consistency. This indicates that while TPR is effective in improving confidence and fluency, it needs to be supported by additional strategies to enhance grammatical accuracy. In conclusion, the TPR method can be considered an effective and innovative teaching strategy for improving students' speaking skills. It promotes student-centered learning, reduces anxiety, and supports the development of communicative competence. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to integrate TPR with other instructional approaches to achieve more comprehensive learning outcomes.

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6. Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted independently without any financial support or personal relationships that could influence the results or interpretation of the study.

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