

# The Application of Total Physical Response Teaching in Elementary School English Vocabulary Teaching

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**Abstract:** Vocabulary is an important foundation for students to learn English, and the teaching of English vocabulary is the focus and difficulty in elementary school English teaching. Traditional English vocabulary teaching methods are boring and single, which can not arouse students' interest in learning English vocabulary and make it difficult for students to really master English vocabulary. Total Physical Response (TPR) is a method that can help primary school students learn English vocabulary quickly and efficiently in a relaxed teaching environment, which was proposed by James Asher, a famous American psychologist. Analyzing the application of Total Physical Response (TPR) theory in elementary English vocabulary teaching and proposing corresponding teaching strategy suggestion. It is hoped that it can effectively help teachers to improve the quality and efficiency of elementary English vocabulary teaching, so as to promote students' motivation and initiative in learning English vocabulary.

**Keywords:** Total Physical Response, English Vocabulary, Vocabulary Teaching, Elementary English.

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## 1. Introduction

In today's world, English is one of the most influential world languages. Learning English well plays an important role for China to go to the world, the world to understand China, and to build a community of human destiny. To learn English well, the first thing is to learn English vocabulary well. George W. Wilkins[8], a famous British linguist, suggested that "without grammar, people cannot express much; without vocabulary, they cannot express anything." Nie Long[14] believes that vocabulary learning continues throughout a person's life.

Vocabulary level directly affects students' English level. However, traditional English vocabulary teaching methods are boring and single, which cannot arouse students' interest in learning English vocabulary. And it is difficult for students to truly master English vocabulary. At present, China's English teaching is based on text content, and due to the number of lectures and time limitations, teachers seldom expand the textbook content in depth[16]. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to adopt new vocabulary teaching methods to stimulate students' interest in learning English vocabulary and improve the effect of vocabulary learning.

James Asher, a famous American psychologist, put forward Total Physical Response (TPR) in the 1960s. He analyzed and researched the process of mother-tongue realization, and advocated linking "language" and "behavior" together to build up language thinking through the coordinated training of the left and right brains to achieve the purpose of foreign language mastery[1]. Since its introduction, Total Physical Response (TPR) has been widely used by researchers at home and abroad in the study of second language teaching. But few studies have been conducted on a specific aspect of English teaching, such as the study of English vocabulary teaching in elementary school. This paper starts from the basic concept of Total Physical Response (TPR). And through the study of its application in elementary school English vocabulary teaching, this paper provides elementary school English teachers with some new teaching methods and tools, so as to help teachers improve the quality and efficiency of elementary school English vocabulary teaching. Thus effectively promote the

enthusiasm and initiative of primary school students in learning English vocabulary.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Previous Studies of Total Physical Response Abroad

James Asher[3] in his book *Learning Another Language Through Actions* proposed Total Physical Response, a method of language teaching based on the coordination of speech and action, which teaches language through physical activities. In 1969, Asher conducted a series of experiments on the application of Total Physical Response in teaching languages such as Japanese and Russian. And concluded that better language acquisition can be achieved by expressing the understanding of actions through bodily reactions and outputting them after understanding[1]. In 1972, Asher conducted another experimental study on the application of Total Physical Response in teaching German. He came to the following conclusions: the use of Total Physical Response in teaching second language listening can lead to a high level of listening comprehension, and listening skills have a positive transferring effect on speaking skills and reading skills [2].

For the Total Physical Response, foreign scholars have different views. Krashen[7] recommended the Total Physical Response in Natural Teaching Method, which is considered to create a friendly and relaxing teaching atmosphere, increase students' interest in learning. And allow students to convert the input language into the output language in interesting language activities. In recent years, Blaine Ray[4], a Spanish teacher, created a new teaching method called TPRS, which based on Total Physical Response. Due to students' lack of interest in learning languages from traditional textbooks, Blaine used the Total Physical Response to teach languages, through which students can learn foreign languages as if they were native speakers. However, the English learned in TPRS is mainly imperative sentences. In order to make students have a strong interest in English, he combined "storytelling" and "role-playing" and proposed the TPRS teaching method.

In summary, this study concludes that in teaching English

vocabulary in elementary school, teachers should give full play to the advantages of the Total Physical Response and mobilize students' interest in learning English vocabulary through vivid and interesting body language.

## **2.2. Previous Studies of Total Physical Response at Home**

After the introduction of Total Physical Response into China, it has aroused the extensive interest of educators and English teachers in China. They have applied the Total Physical Response to English classroom teaching and achieved remarkable results. Qu Qian[15] applied the Total Physical Response to study the actions in English teaching in the lower primary grades and found that the Total Physical Response can create a more relaxed learning environment for primary school students. And it can concretize the abstract language to help students quickly understand and internalize what they have learned. At the same time, it obviously improves their listening and speaking abilities. Dong Jie[11] used the Total Physical Response in elementary English vocabulary teaching and found that the Total Physical Response improved students' confidence and interest in learning English, changed the way students memorized words, and provided insights into the practice of elementary English vocabulary teaching. Chen Si[10] applied the Total Physical Response to elementary school English speaking teaching and proved that the Total Physical Response can cultivate primary school students' interest in learning English and improve the effect of English learning, which provides a reference for the reform and innovation of elementary school English teaching.

To summarize, this study concluded that the Total Physical Response can create a comfortable and interesting learning environment for elementary school students and increase their interest in learning English vocabulary.

## **3. TPR and English Vocabulary Teaching in Elementary School**

The English Curriculum Standard for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) [18] requires teachers to design language practice activities with multi-sensory participation according to the cognitive characteristics of the students. So that the students can feel the fun of learning English in rich and interesting contexts, centering on the meaning of the theme through activities such as sensing, imitating, observing, thinking, exchanging and presenting. And the Total Physical Response must meet the following three conditions in teaching: "the combination of movement and language as the basis, foreign language learning needs to be centered on the teaching of body movement, and focus on teacher-student interaction in the process of language learning"[17]. This requires teachers to familiarize themselves with the target vocabulary before implementing the Total Physical Response. And to design detailed movements, develop uniform movement specifications, design a series of target vocabulary into instructions, and subsequently output them through body movements in the classroom with the expectation that students can immediately make corresponding verbal and movement responses according to the instructions after practicing them. It will help students to better master the English vocabulary they have learned, and further deepen students'. This can help students better master the English vocabulary they have learned and further deepen their knowledge and understanding of the vocabulary they have

learned.

Therefore the following steps should be followed to teach English vocabulary in elementary school:

### **1) Observation Phase**

The teacher verbalizes commands and demonstrates corresponding physical actions, while students observe and listen without participation.

### **2) Imitation Phase**

The teacher issues commands with demonstrations, then requires students to both verbally repeat the commands and physically imitate the actions.

### **3) Comprehension Phase**

The teacher gives verbal commands without physical demonstration, requiring students to independently execute the appropriate actions based solely on verbal instructions.

### **4) Application Phase**

The teacher provides guidance without demonstration. At this phase, previously learned actions can be integrated with new commands to develop students' ability to process complex instructions.

### **5) Reinforcement & Practice Phase**

After systematic practice, role reversal occurs: selected students issue commands while the teacher and other students perform the corresponding actions, thereby developing students' oral production skills.

It is important to note that at the beginning of the learning process, there is a "silent period" [7] before students can express themselves, and this period is also the time when students internalize the language. It is only after repeated and extensive visual and auditory input that students are able to produce language.

## **4. Teaching Recommendations for Applying TPR in Primary School English Vocabulary Instruction**

### **4.1. Student-Centered Approach with Progressive Learning**

Based on the left-right brain division of labor theory of Total Physical Response, body movement is an effective comprehensible input[12]. It allows the right brain's body coordination function to be effectively developed and exercised, and allows the left and right brains to play an active role in the language acquisition process. Thus promoting students' comprehension and output of the target language. Therefore, in teaching, in order to effectively implement the Total Physical Response, it is necessary to follow the following principles: combining language and movement as the basic, focusing on body movement expression, taking the students as the basis, and improving teacher-student interaction and communication[13]. When elementary school teachers use the Total Physical Response to teach vocabulary, they should start with the simplest vocabulary first, so that students can have a deeper impression of the vocabulary they have learned through simple body movements. For example, when teaching the word "eye", the teacher can say "eye" while pointing to his own eyes, so that the students will have a preliminary impression of the word 'eye' which means "eye". Then we gradually deepen the difficulty by expanding the word "eye" from a single word to the phrase "wink my eye" and adding the action of "winking". Students understand the meaning of "wink my eye" by listening to the teacher's instructions and observing the teacher's movements before

doing or saying the instructions. Through this student-centered, step-by-step principle, teachers can give students a lot of listening and body movements to help them understand the target language, make them memorize the vocabulary in a vivid and visual way, and increase their interest in learning English vocabulary.

## 4.2. Diversified Teaching Methods for Innovative Classroom

The Total Physical Response is a flexible and highly compatible teaching method. Our current educational environment would have encouraged teachers to adopt diversified teaching methods to innovate classroom teaching, to provide support for meeting students' individualized learning and to promote the balanced development of compulsory education. Therefore, in elementary school English vocabulary teaching, the traditional teacher-centered, passive-reception approach, which characterized by spoon-feeding methods, lecture-style instruction, and translation-based drills has long been abandoned. Teachers should use Total Physical Response as the main focus in daily elementary English vocabulary teaching, supplemented by other teaching methods to accomplish classroom teaching. Teaching in a traditional single way for a whole class will make elementary school students feel boring and bored, and they will be resistant to vocabulary learning, which is not conducive to the subsequent vocabulary teaching. Teachers can use physical objects to assist teaching in the English vocabulary classroom, such as teaching cards, animation, children's songs and so on. Through intuitive object teaching can stimulate the visual perception function of the right brain of elementary school students, attract students' attention, enhance students' interest in vocabulary learning, and help students deepen their understanding of the knowledge they have learned. So as to improve their learning efficiency. In addition, teachers can also reasonably utilize and innovatively use digital technology and online teaching platforms in vocabulary teaching to carry out online and offline integrated teaching.

## 4.3. Creating a Joyful and Stress-Free Learning Environment

According to Asher, "An important condition for successful language learning is the absence of stress.[2]" We are stress-free in the process of acquiring our mother tongue, but the learning environment of a second language often leads to anxiety and stress. Freeman[5] suggests that second language learning should be enjoyable and more efficient. Teachers therefore need to consider exactly how to create a relaxing and enjoyable teaching and learning environment in teaching English vocabulary in elementary school and how to minimize students' stress. Teachers should allow students to learn English vocabulary at their own pace and should not force students to produce vocabulary when their proficiency is low and they are afraid of making mistakes. Instead, teachers should patiently wait for students' spontaneous output. Teachers should take advantage of "dominance" and consciously provide students with language input to encourage them to express themselves[9]. In addition, teachers should allow students to make mistakes, avoid correcting them too much, and should not interrupt students' language output to correct mistakes. If every mistake made by students is corrected immediately, language acquisition will be converted into language learning, which will prevent students from learning English vocabulary. Freeman[5]

suggests that teachers should be patient and should only correct major mistakes. As the students' learning ability improves further, teachers can correct more minor errors, which will also be more likely to increase elementary students' interest in learning English vocabulary.

## 5. Conclusion

The Total Physical Response is very useful for improving English vocabulary teaching in elementary school, which can mobilize students' motivation to learn English vocabulary and motivate them to consciously devote themselves to vocabulary learning. Teachers can use the Total Physical Response in the classroom to stimulate the vitality of the classroom, make the classroom atmosphere more active, and guide the students to participate in the classroom activities actively. Teachers in elementary English vocabulary teaching should adhere to the student's main position, step by step teaching, to promote students' understanding and output of the target language. Teachers should be based on the Total Physical Response of comprehensive application of a variety of teaching methods, the implementation of diversified teaching, innovative learning English vocabulary classroom form, enhance the students' interest in learning English vocabulary. Teachers should be for the students to create a relaxing and pleasant teaching environment, to enhance the students' interest in learning English vocabulary. A relaxed and pleasant teaching environment should be created for students to increase their interest in learning English vocabulary.

Due to time constraints, this dissertation is not strong enough to go into the classroom to conduct an empirical study of the Total Physical Response in teaching English vocabulary in elementary schools. The applicability and persuasiveness of the proposed teaching strategy suggestions need to be improved, and the researcher will continue to study and explore the Total Physical Response in the future practice of education.

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