Students' Engagement and Perception towards Learning Arabic Vocabulary through the Total Physical Response Method (TPR)

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Abstract. Vocabulary learning is a fundamental component in Arabic language acquisition and requires a teaching approach capable of helping students understand and retain vocabulary effectively. This research aimed to describe the engagement and perceptions of students regarding the use of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in Arabic vocabulary learning in the seventh grade of Al-Muqoddasah Junior High School (SMP). The research used a qualitative approach with a case study research type that involved 32 students as participants. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, and subsequently analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's model. The research results indicated that the majority of students stated that the TPR method helped them understand and remember vocabulary more easily. Students appeared active in following instructions, showed high focus, and responded to movements with enthusiasm. The interviews revealed that students viewed movement-based learning as more enjoyable, less boring, and as enhancing their learning motivation. Although there were technical constraints such as limited classroom space, these obstacles did not affect the students' positive perceptions of the TPR method. This research concluded that using the TPR method was capable of increasing student engagement and building positive perceptions in Arabic vocabulary learning, and provides recommendations for integrating this method more systematically into learning at the junior high school level.

Keyword: Arabic learning, Total Physical Response, vocabulary,

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning is a fundamental foundation in language acquisition, including the Arabic language. Mastery of mufradāt (vocabulary items) is a prerequisite for students to be able to comprehend texts, respond to instructions, and communicate functionally in the target language. In learning practice, students often encounter obstacles related to memory retention, saturation/boredom, and a lack of context for vocabulary use. Therefore, a learning approach that is more concrete, interactive, and involves direct experience is needed. Movement-based learning approaches are proven to be capable of facilitating the connection between meaning and physical representation, thereby strengthening students' absorption and retention (Macedonia, 2025; Liu et al., 2025).

The Total Physical Response (TPR) method offers a learning alternative that emphasizes physical responses to verbal instructions. In language learning, this method aligns with the principle of embodied learning, which is that language comprehension can be reinforced through physical movement. Several studies show that TPR is effective in helping students remember new vocabulary and building a learning experience that is more enjoyable and meaningful. TPR also allows students to actively engage without the pressure to produce language from the start, thereby providing a safe space for learners in the initial stages of language acquisition (Tellier, 2008).

In Indonesia, the interest in applying TPR (Total Physical Response) in language learning, especially Arabic, shows quite significant development. Several studies report that TPR is able to enhance students' basic understanding, particularly in the mastery of concrete vocabulary (mufradāt). Furthermore, TPR also has a positive impact on learning motivation as well as student engagement during the learning process. The implementation of structured movements provides a multisensory experience that plays a vital role in the process of internalizing linguistic meanings and concepts (Kiswanto et al., 2023; Liputo, 2024).

Although various studies indicate the effectiveness of TPR (Total Physical Response), there is still a research gap regarding how junior high school students interpret their experience in TPR-based learning, especially in the context of Arabic language instruction. The majority of previous studies focused on the elementary school or kindergarten level. In contrast, the use of TPR at the junior high level has not been extensively researched from the perspective of student involvement and perception. Therefore, this research is important to fill this void and provide an empirical description of the implementation of TPR in teaching mufradāt (vocabulary) at the junior high school level (Maulidia & Hasibuan, 2021; Afrianti, 2023).

This research aims to describe the involvement and perception of seventh-grade students at Al Muqoddasah Junior High School regarding Arabic vocabulary learning using the TPR (Total Physical Response) method. The research focus is directed towards two main problem formulations, namely: (1) how student involvement in learning Arabic vocabulary through the TPR method; and (2) what is the students' perception of the learning process. This research uses a qualitative approach, with the hope of capturing students' learning experiences in a more in-depth and comprehensive manner (Zur & Selfieni, 2022; Nugraha, 2021).

The researchers hope that this study provides theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this research enriches the study of movement-based language learning and the contribution of the TPR approach in Arabic language learning. Practically, this research can be a reference for teachers in designing more effective and engaging vocabulary (mufradāt) learning strategies. Furthermore, the results of this study can open opportunities for the development of an integrative learning model that combines TPR with other approaches to improve the quality of Arabic language learning at the secondary education level (Repetto, 2023; Oktaviani, 2023).

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study research design to understand students' experiences, perceptions, and involvement in learning Arabic vocabulary through the Total Physical Response (TPR) method. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to delve into the subjective meanings that emerge from students' direct experiences in the classroom, as well as provide a more comprehensive scope of interpretation of the learning phenomenon. In language research, the qualitative approach has been widely used to analyze student responses to movement-based learning methods, especially those related to meaning processing and embodied learning experiences (Macedonia, 2025; Liu et al., 2025).

The research was conducted at Al-Muqoddasah Junior High School in the odd semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. This research is a case study involving a single class of 32 students as the general research subjects. However, to obtain qualitative depth, the researcher

applied a Purposive Sampling technique by selecting five students as key informants: S-03, S-07, S-10, S-15, and S-17. The selection of these five subjects was based on Maximum Variation Sampling criteria to capture a broad spectrum of responses toward the TPR method. The inclusion criteria included: (1) differences in linguistic competence levels (ranging from highly proficient to those experiencing difficulties), (2) variations in learning styles (specifically to observe the effectiveness of kinesthetic elements across different students), and (3) the students' ability to articulate their learning experiences during in-depth interview sessions. The characteristic of the students still being in the concrete operational development stage makes them a relevant group for analyzing learning activities with a movement-based learning method (Kiswanto et al., 2023; Maulidia & Hasibuan, 2021).

The research was conducted in three stages, namely: (1) the pre-data collection stage; (2) the implementation stage of the TPR learning; and (3) the final data collection stage. In the initial stage, the researchers conducted a preliminary observation to understand the learning patterns and the students' readiness to use the TPR method. In the implementation stage, the teacher provided verbal instructions followed by physical movements corresponding to the meaning of the vocabulary, encompassing activities such as pointing to objects, performing simple actions, and mimicking basic verbs in Arabic. This stage followed the TPR implementation protocol commonly used in foreign language learning, as outlined in various recent studies. (Liputo, 2024).

Tabel 1. Student Engagement Observation Checklist (TPR Method – Arabic Vocabulary)

No	Aspects of Engagement	Description	Assesment scale
1	Physical Response Accuracy	Students' accuracy in performing physical actions that correspond to the Arabic vocabulary/command spoken by the teacher.	A=appropriate S= Slow W= Wrong NR= No response
2	Focus of Attention (Input Reception)	The students' level of visual and auditory attention to verbal instructions and body language cues given by the teacher.	H= High F= fair L= lower
3	Active Participation & Enthusiasm Level	The student's willingness to physically engage in all TPR activities without the need for prompting or coercion.	VE = Very Enthusiastic M = Moderate P = Passive R = Rejecting (or Resistant / Refusing, depending on context)
4	Oral Production (Vocabulary Repetition)	Students' attempt to imitate or pronounce the related Arabic vocabulary, after performing a physical response (the verbalization phase in TPR).	CP = Clear & Precise U = Understandable A = Attempting S = Silent
5	Interaction and Collaboration with Themes	Student involvement in giving commands (teacher role) or responding to commands given by peers (pair/group exercises).	AI = Active Interaction LI = Low Interaction NI = No Interaction WT = Waiting for Turn

A structured interview was conducted with 32 students using a prepared list of questions. These questions were designed to uncover the students' learning experiences and perceptions regarding the TPR method (Total Physical Response). The list of questions can be seen in the following table:

Table 2. The questionnaires of students' perception about using the TPR Method

No	Questions
1	Do you like learning Arabic vocabulary using movements/gestures?
2	Do movements/gestures make it easier for you to remember Arabic words?
3	Does learning with TPR make you more enthusiastic in class?
4	Do you feel that learning Arabic becomes more fun/enjoyable with TPR?
5	Are there any difficulties when learning using movements/gestures?
6	In your opinion, is TPR better than other methods of learning Arabic? Why?
7	Do you want to learn Arabic vocabulary using TPR? Why?
8	Does learning with TPR help you speak Arabic more fluently?
9	What are your suggestions so that learning Arabic with TPR can be better/improved?

The main research instruments were observation sheets and semi-structured interview guides. Observation was used to record aspects of physical involvement, attention, response to instructions, and emotional expression during the learning process. Interviews were used to explore students' perceptions of the ease, difficulty, interest, and their experience using the TPR (Total Physical Response) method. The interview guide contained nine main questions that had been adjusted to the research objectives, such as the level of comfort in performing movements, the ease of recalling vocabulary, and a comparison of TPR with other learning methods. The interview instrument was developed based on the principles of perception evaluation commonly used in TPR and language learning research (Zur & Selfieni, 2022; Nugraha, 2021).

Three main techniques were employed in this research: observation, interview, and documentation. Observation was conducted directly during the learning process to capture students' spontaneous responses to the TPR instructions. Interviews were conducted after the entire learning series was completed, allowing students to reflect on their experiences more thoroughly. Documentation, in the form of activity photos, teachers' notes, and recordings of the learning process, was used to strengthen the findings from the observation and interviews. The combination of these three techniques allowed the researcher to obtain a comprehensive picture of student involvement and perception (Afrianti, 2023; Abdullah, 2024).

This research employed data analysis using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data condensation stage, the researcher grouped the information obtained from interviews and observations into themes such as involvement/engagement, motivation, ease of vocabulary comprehension, and learning obstacles/barriers. Data display was done by presenting interview quotes, summary tables, and narrative descriptions regarding student responses. Conclusion drawing was carried out gradually by considering the learning context, the suitability/consistency of the findings, and the theoretical relevance of previous research results. This kind of analysis approach is commonly used in qualitative-based educational research.

To ensure the validity of the findings, the researcher used source and technique triangulation methods. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing results from several sources (participants). Technique triangulation was done by using more than one data collection method (observation, interviews, and documents) to ensure the consistency of the findings. In addition, the researcher performed member checking by asking the students to reconfirm the meaning of their answers so that the interpretation remained accurate. Validity in qualitative research is very important to ensure that the findings are not biased and truly represent the students' learning experiences (Repetto, 2023; Pahri, 2021).

FINDINGS

Student Engagement in Vocabulary Learning Through TPR

The research results indicate that the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in learning Arabic vocabulary in grade VII of Al-Muqoddasah Junior High School yielded positive results regarding student engagement and perception. Of the total student participants, the majority of students stated that the use of movements helped them understand and memorize vocabulary more quickly. Students also showed increased physical and verbal responses during the learning process, including following the teacher's instructions, imitating the movements, and demonstrating consistent enthusiasm throughout the learning activities. These findings reinforce previous studies by Kiswanto et al. (2023) and Liputo (2024) regarding the effectiveness of learning in triggering active student engagement. This is reflected in the students' readiness to respond to instructions both verbally and motorically, as well as the presence of sustained motivational stability throughout the learning activities.

Observation data show that Total Physical Response (TPR) activities encourage students to be more active, both motorically and cognitively. Students appeared focused on the teacher's instructions and demonstrated the ability to mimic the movements accurately. Several students commented that vocabulary associated with movement was easier to remember compared to the traditional lecture or rote memorization methods. These findings are consistent with the research by Macedonia (2025) and Liu et al. (2025), which emphasize that the integration of physical activity can accelerate the internalization of vocabulary meaning and strengthen long-term memory retention.

Interviews with students revealed that the majority found TPR (Total Physical Response) learning to be more enjoyable and less boring. Students stated that the learning experience became more lively because they could move freely while understanding the meaning of words. Some students also expressed that this method made them more confident when asked to respond to instructions or produce words orally. Nevertheless, some students mentioned obstacles such as inadequate classroom space and difficulty following certain movements. This aligns with findings by Zur & Selfieni (2022) and Nugraha (2021), which suggest that physical and spatial constraints do not necessarily diminish the pedagogical benefits or the positive perceptions of TPR.

The findings of this research reinforce these results with empirical evidence at the junior high school level. The application of the TPR (Total Physical Response) learning method is proven to have a significant impact on students' conceptual understanding. This is reflected in the statement from **S-3** (Moderate Ability Category), who stated:

> "When the teacher gave instructions while demonstrating the movements, I immediately connected the meaning of the words with the movement. I finally understood it faster and did not forget. Learning felt active, did not make me sleepy, and I could follow the lesson with more confidence."

Based on the results of the qualitative data analysis through in-depth interviews, it was found that the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method had a significant impact on students' learning comfort. One of the case study subjects, **S-7**, who represents a specific category, stated:

> Through TPR, I experienced a different way of learning than usual. While I usually memorize words from books, I can now practice movements that make it easier for me to remember the meaning of those words. Furthermore, I feel more confident in answering the teacher's questions because those movements seem to provide "clues" for my brain. I have also become more enthusiastic, especially when the movements are funny. My classmates also appear more active, making the classroom atmosphere more lively.'

In an effort to explore the qualitative depth regarding the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, the researcher conducted observations and in-depth interviews with purposively selected subjects. One significant finding emerged from subject S-10, who represents the group of students with strong memory retention improvement through kinesthetic activities. **S-10** revealed that the TPR method provides a more concrete learning experience:

> "In my opinion, TPR makes learning Arabic more tangible/real. When I move my hands or body according to the teacher's instructions, I feel like I am directly experiencing the meaning of the word. Initially, I thought this method was only suitable for small children, but it turns out that I actually memorize things faster. I feel my ability improves because every time I repeat the movement, I automatically repeat the vocabulary as well. I rarely feel bored during the lesson."

Student Perception of Vocabulary Learning Using the TPR Method

Based on students' perception, **S-15** expressed, "While using TPR, I felt the process of learning vocabulary was like playing a game. Usually, I have trouble remembering new words, but through TPR I could memorize faster because my body was also moving. I think the movement made me more focused. Although some movements were initially difficult to imitate, I eventually got used to them. What I like most is that TPR made me interact more with my friends. Learning felt more lively and enjoyable."

S-17 "My opinion of TPR (Total Physical Response) is very positive. With TPR, I feel it is easier to understand the teacher's instructions because the movements help me visualize the meaning of the words. I also feel that this method eliminates my shyness when speaking Arabic, as I can imitate the movements first before saying the words. Interestingly, I feel that the vocabulary learned with TPR lasts longer in my memory. I hope a method like this is used frequently in the next lessons."

DISCUSSION

Student Engagement in Vocabulary Learning Through TPR

The increase in student engagement in this study indicates that TPR (Total Physical Response) is capable of changing the learning atmosphere from passive to active. The physical involvement demanded by this method directly connects students to the meaning of the vocabulary, thus activating multisensory information processing. This finding aligns with the concept of embodied learning, which asserts that body movement can strengthen the mental representation of a word. International research on language learning shows that physical association increases memory activation and accelerates the comprehension of linguistic concepts (Macedonia, 2025; Repetto, 2023).

High student engagement in class also aligns with research findings on the effectiveness of TPR (Total Physical Response) in increasing participation and learning activity. The study by Kiswanto et al. (2023) found that students were more engaged when learning Arabic was associated with movement, both in the form of simple instructions and more complex physical activities. Concurrently, Liputo (2024) reported that TPR created a more dynamic and natural learning atmosphere, leading students to feel more confident in expressing language responses.

These qualitative data from S-3 demonstrate that kinesthetic engagement helps students build cognitive bridges between verbal instructions and real meaning. Emotional aspects, such as increased self-confidence and the elimination of drowsiness, indicate that the created learning environment is capable of lowering the students' affective filter, thereby making the material easier to internalize.

Involving a physical response to verbal instructions is the most effective way to learn a language and is the core of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method. This student's opinion

directly reflects the main principle of TPR. The underlying premise of TPR is that memory is stimulated through movement. Understanding the spoken language should be developed before the ability to speak. Students are encouraged to wait until they are ready to speak, by first physically demonstrating comprehension of a command (Asher, 1984). As Winitz (2006) tells "TPR facilitates learning by creating a strong link between the verbal input and a specific physical activity. This dual coding (verbal and motoric) helps in creating stronger memory traces and significantly improves long-term retention of vocabulary compared to traditional methods." In addition, Krashen, (1982) declares "One of the main strengths of TPR is that it reduces learner anxiety because students are not forced to speak and are allowed a silent period where they build competence through physical response. This lowers the affective filter, making input more readily available for acquisition." meanwhile, Larsen, Freeman & Anderson (2011) agree, "TPR offers a non-threatening, active, and fun way to acquire vocabulary. By requiring learners to move their bodies, it taps into the brain's natural capacity for linking language and action, promoting a high degree of engagement and intrinsic motivation."

These findings of S-7 align with the theory proposed by Sari & Agustiani (2023), which suggests that the kinesthetic method in TPR involves physical movement to facilitate language encoding. This not only enhances memory retention but also minimizes the "affective filter" or students' psychological barriers in language learning. By responding non-verbally first, students build confidence before progressing to oral production, which ultimately creates a dynamic and enjoyable learning environment compared to traditional rote-memorization methods.

This finding is consistent with the theory proposed by Lestari & Sari (2022), which states that memory is formed more effectively when there is a strong connection between verbal and motor stimuli. The brain's active involvement in processing auditory comprehension alongside kinesthetic responses strengthens the neural pathways for word retention. Consequently, the positive experience reported by S-10 proves that this method is capable of lowering the affective filter and significantly increasing learning motivation.

Student Perception of Vocabulary Learning Using the TPR Method

Student perception of using TPR (Total Physical Response) is very positive. The majority of students in this study judged that TPR facilitates the comprehension of vocabulary meaning and reduces the burden of memorization. They felt that learning became more enjoyable because they could move while studying. This student opinion is consistent with Afrianti's (2023) research, which showed that TPR increases learning comfort and helps students remember vocabulary more effectively.

In addition to aiding comprehension, TPR is also considered to play an important role in enhancing students' learning motivation. Abdullah's research (2024) noted that physical activity-based learning is capable of fostering students' intrinsic motivation because they feel they have real involvement in the learning process. Meanwhile, Zur & Selfieni's study (2022) indicated that students' positive perception of TPR correlates with an increase in their interest and engagement in foreign language learning. The findings of this research are consistent with both of those results, especially in the context of learning Arabic at the junior high school level.

Some students did mention constraints such as cramped classrooms or difficulties following certain movements, but these are technical barriers that also appear in various studies related to TPR (Total Physical Response). The study by Oktaviani (2023), for example, noted that the success of TPR is highly influenced by the readiness of the learning environment and the teacher's ability to manage class dynamics. These barriers do not diminish the main benefits of TPR, and in this study, students still rated the method as one of the best ways to learn new vocabulary (Oktaviani, 2023; Maulidia & Hasibuan, 2021).

Theoretically, the findings of this research support the comprehension-based language learning model, which emphasizes the importance of input processing before language production. TPR (Total Physical Response) aligns with this principle because students are

allowed to understand the meaning of vocabulary through movement before being asked to repeat or produce the words orally. Furthermore, this study reinforces the principle of multisensory learning, specifically that the combination of visual, auditory, and motor skills has a positive effect on memory. The study by Liu et al. (2025) shows that embodied learning enhances academic performance, particularly in language learning (Liu et al., 2025; Macedonia, 2025).

In line with S-15 expression, Ghaith (2020) explained that TPR is effective because it utilizes procedural memory through physical movement, which not only strengthens vocabulary retention but also increases focus. Furthermore, the reciprocal interaction that occurs in TPR exercises encourages social engagement and makes learning more fun.

Referring to S-17 opinion, Quartina (2021), "A central tenet of TPR is that language comprehension precedes production, and that motor activity provides a 'memory trace' to anchor linguistic items. This physical involvement reduces cognitive overload, allowing the learner to focus primarily on decoding the incoming verbal information." In addition, Aulia et al. (2025) argue, "TPR is highly effective in language instruction because it lowers the affective filter, enabling students to engage with the target language without the pressure of immediate verbal production, thereby fostering a low-anxiety learning environment which is crucial for novice learners of Arabic."

The results of this research have important implications for Arabic language learning in junior high schools (SMP). First, teachers can make TPR (Total Physical Response) the main method in teaching vocabulary, not just a learning variation. Second, movement-based learning can provide an effective alternative for students who are less interested in traditional methods. Third, the findings of this study can serve as a basis for the development of an integrative learning model that combines TPR with visual media, language games, or learning technology (Pahri, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This research indicates that the Total Physical Response (TPR) method has a significant impact on students' engagement and perception in learning Arabic vocabulary. Based on the results of observations and interviews, students appeared active in responding to the teacher's instructions, followed the movements with enthusiasm, and showed higher concentration during the learning process. The physical activity integrated with language input helped students understand the meaning of the vocabulary faster and more accurately, aligning with the concept of embodied learning, which emphasizes the role of movement in strengthening linguistic processing.

From a perception standpoint, the majority of students stated that TPR (Total Physical Response) made vocabulary learning more enjoyable, easy to remember, and not boring. They felt more confident because they could understand the teacher's instructions through a combination of movements and words. This positive perception reinforces the finding that physical activity-based methods can increase students' intrinsic motivation and comfort in learning Arabic. TPR is considered more effective than traditional rote learning or lecture methods, as also reflected in various studies that assess the effectiveness of TPR on language learning.

Overall, this research confirms that TPR (Total Physical Response) is worthy of being a primary strategy in teaching vocabulary (mufradāt) at the junior high school level. Its implementation not only enhances student engagement and positive perception but also opens up space for learning that is more communicative, interactive, and aligned with the developmental characteristics of middle school-aged students. Theoretically, this study reinforces previous research on the role of movement-based learning in language acquisition. Practically, these findings provide a recommendation to educators to integrate TPR more systematically into Arabic language learning, while adjusting classroom conditions and activity variations to ensure the learning environment remains conducive.

This research has limitations, particularly concerning the scope of participants, which only covered one class in one school. Further research could expand the subject to different educational levels or contexts, as well as examine the integration of TPR with modern learning strategies such as digital media, language games, or project-based approaches. Nevertheless, the results of this study make an important contribution in reinforcing the evidence that learning Arabic vocabulary will be more effective if designed with an approach that involves the body, direct experience, and students' emotional engagement.

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