



Total Physical Response Storytelling in Early Childhood English Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a conceptual analysis of the application of Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS) in early childhood English language learning for children aged 3–6 years. Drawing on Krashen's comprehensible input theory, Asher's Total Physical Response, and Ray's narrative-based interaction, TPRS is designed to create a natural and engaging learning environment through movement and storytelling. A review of Scopus-indexed literature reveals that existing studies on TPR and storytelling are fragmented and largely focused on vocabulary acquisition or school-aged learners. Research examining TPRS as a comprehensive approach in early childhood contexts remains limited, particularly with respect to listening comprehension, language retention, and early storytelling skills. The analysis indicates that TPRS has strong potential to enhance vocabulary development, learner engagement, and confidence in language use. These findings suggest that TPRS is a developmentally appropriate and promising framework for early childhood English instruction. Further empirical research is recommended to validate its effectiveness across broader linguistic outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Childhood is a crucial period in the development of language abilities, during which children learn most effectively through play, movement, interaction, and meaningful experiences. As the role of English continues to grow as a global means of communication, the integration of English language learning in early childhood education has received increasing attention. (Lin, Yeh, & Chen, 2022) Learning approaches at this stage must align with children's cognitive and physical development, making enjoyable, experiential, and contextual methods highly essential. Within this context, Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS) emerges as a promising approach because it combines movement, physical responses, comprehensible language input, and storytelling as an engaging medium for children to construct meaning.

TPRS is rooted in the principles of Total Physical Response (TPR), which emphasizes the connection between language and physical action, and is further developed through the use of stories as a learning context. Theoretically, this approach is grounded in Krashen's input hypothesis, which posits that language acquisition occurs when learners receive meaningful input slightly above their current proficiency level. (Lizardi et al., 2025) Stories provide a natural context that makes such input easy to understand, while physical responses support

deeper cognitive processing in line with embodied cognition theory. Research in early childhood education also indicates that children tend to be more engaged and better able to grasp learning materials when exposed to activities that integrate movement, sensory experiences, and narrative structures. Thus, TPRS is considered well aligned with their developmental needs.

A review of Scopus-indexed literature shows that studies on English learning strategies integrating movement and narrative for young children remain fragmented. Er highlights the benefits of TPR, though his focus is limited to basic vocabulary acquisition (Er, 2013). Hadley et al. examine teachers' language practices in early childhood settings but do not assess interventions that combine movement and storytelling (Burke Hadley, Barnes, Wiernik, & Raghavan, 2022). Yao et al. demonstrate the effectiveness of narrative-based interventions, yet most of the studies involve elementary school children rather than kindergarten-aged learners (Yao, Xi, & Prieto, 2025). Cunningham et al. find language gains through movement and storytelling, but their research also centers on school-aged children, not early childhood (Cunningham et al., 2025). Anatoli outlines the potential of embodied learning but does not provide empirical evaluation of TPRS-based activities (Anatoli, 2025). Consequently, no study has comprehensively examined Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS) in early childhood contexts, highlighting the need for new research that explicitly evaluates this approach.

This article aims to provide an in-depth conceptual analysis of Total Physical Response Storytelling within the context of early childhood English language learning. It reviews the theoretical foundations of TPRS, explains its pedagogical components, and outlines strategies for implementing it in early childhood education settings. Through the development of a structured conceptual model, this article seeks to demonstrate how TPRS can support children's linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional development in the process of acquiring English.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with an analytical literature review design, aiming to examine, interpret, and synthesize a range of scholarly sources to develop an in-depth understanding of the concept of Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS) in early childhood English language learning (Bulan & Kasapoğlu, 2021). As the study does not involve an empirical population or sample, its focus is directed toward relevant academic sources, including indexed journal articles, books on language acquisition theory, research on TPR and storytelling, and studies related to early childhood learning.

The literature was selected through a systematic search of scientific databases based on specific inclusion criteria: (1) publications addressing TPR, storytelling, embodied learning, or early childhood English language learning; (2) sources with theoretical or conceptual relevance to TPRS; and (3) scholarly articles and books published in reputable journals or by academic publishers. Literature that was not relevant to early childhood education contexts or lacked a clear academic foundation was excluded from the analysis.

Data were collected using documentation techniques, with the primary instrument being an analytical category checklist developed by the researcher based on core themes,

namely TPR theory, storytelling theory, embodied learning models, and characteristics of early childhood learning. The data were analyzed using content analysis to identify themes, patterns, and dominant findings in the literature (Rachão, Joukes, & Fernande, 2023), followed by thematic synthesis to construct a new conceptual framework that systematically explains the potential of TPRS.

RESULT

1.1 Total Physical Response Storytelling in Early Childhood English Language Learning

Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS) is an English language learning approach that integrates physical movement with storytelling to create a natural learning experience for young children. Through movement, children grasp the meaning of words in a concrete manner, while stories provide engaging and memorable contexts. This approach supports the development of listening skills, vocabulary acquisition, and simple storytelling abilities (Liu, Quek, & Gomez, 2024) TPRS also enhances children’s engagement and confidence, as learning becomes enjoyable, interactive, and aligned with the natural ways young learners explore and process new information.

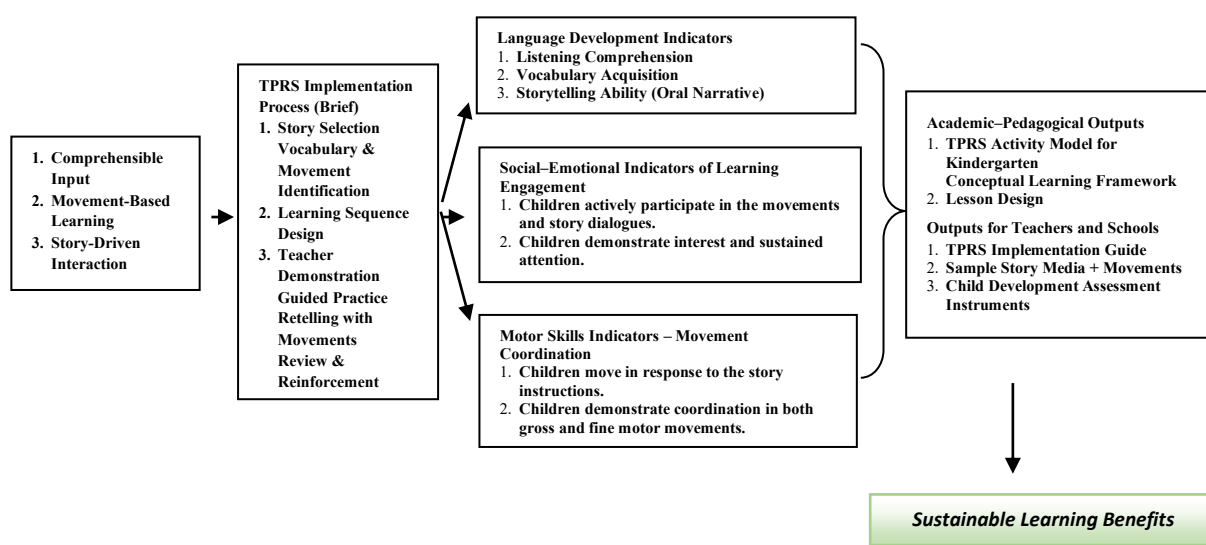


Figure 1. Total Physical Response Storytelling in Early Childhood English Language Learning

Note: The TPRS concept is grounded in three major theories: Comprehensible Input by Stephen Krashen (1982, 1985), Movement-Based Learning/TPR by James J. Asher (1969, 1977), and Story-Driven Interaction/TPRS developed by Blaine Ray in the 1990s through the integration of movement and storytelling.

The Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS) model in early childhood English language learning is an integrated approach that combines the strengths of comprehensible input, movement-based learning, and story-driven interaction, resulting in a learning experience aligned with the developmental characteristics of young

children. The theoretical foundation of TPRS is built upon three major sources widely recognized in language acquisition studies. (Weygandt, 2025) First, Stephen Krashen's Comprehensible Input theory (1982, 1985), which emphasizes that language acquisition occurs when learners receive understandable linguistic input ($i+1$), meaning language that is slightly above their current proficiency level yet still interpretable through context, intonation, or visual support. For young children, comprehensible input becomes more effective when contextualized in simple, repetitive stories enriched with nonverbal cues, positioning Krashen's theory as the rationale for placing stories at the core of TPRS instruction.

Second, the Movement-Based Learning or Total Physical Response (TPR) approach developed by James Asher (1969, 1977), which asserts that the connection between language and physical action plays a key role in early language comprehension. Asher argues that children absorb meaning more easily when they respond physically to given instructions. Physical actions reinforce memory pathways and strengthen natural language processing (Wu, Wang, & Chen, 2015) Third, the Story-Driven Interaction approach introduced by Blaine Ray in the 1990s, which integrated movement with narrative structure and eventually evolved into TPRS. Ray modified TPR by adding story frameworks that provide emotional context, meaningful repetition, and opportunities for active child participation. Thus, the TPRS concept merges insights from all three scholars into a learning model that is not only movement-based but also richly narrative and capable of delivering continuous linguistic input.

TPRS features systematic stages designed to ensure that stories, movements, and language input are logically interconnected. The first stage is selecting age-appropriate stories for children aged 3–6, taking into account the simplicity of the plot, manageable length, and presence of key vocabulary to be introduced (Prima, 2024) elected stories serve as the foundation of learning because young children naturally acquire language through meaningful contexts and emotional engagement with narratives.

The second stage is determining vocabulary and movements, which involves mapping key words to physical actions so that each vocabulary item has a clear, concrete, and easily imitable representation. This linkage between language and movement strengthens embodied learning principles, where language processing occurs through body–mind integration. The third stage is designing the learning sequence, which includes warming-up activities, story presentation, movement demonstration, guided practice, active storytelling, and closing activities. This structure ensures that children enter the learning process gradually—from vocabulary introduction, to meaning association, to observing the story, and finally participating in storytelling and movement. The fourth stage is teacher demonstration, which is pivotal to successful TPRS implementation. Teachers must present language and movements clearly, expressively, and engagingly. As the teacher reads or tells the story while integrating supportive physical actions, children follow the movements while receiving natural language input.

The fifth stage is guided practice, during which children repeat vocabulary or phrases using varied rhythms, tempos, and formats. Teachers may use simple question-

and-answer prompts to assess comprehension (Eisenstadt, Liverpool, Infanti, Ciuvat, & Carlsson, 2021) The sixth stage is retelling with movement, where children reenact scenes or retell the storyline using the words and movements they have learned (Irmayanti, Chou, & Anuar, 2025) This stage strengthens narrative ability, listening comprehension, and speaking confidence. The seventh stage is review and reinforcement, which provides light repetition to help children recall vocabulary and story sequences without pressure. Teachers may also give simple questions to check children's understanding of the story content.

The sequence of implementation processes becomes the foundation for identifying learning indicators, namely observable signs of competency achievement that emerge during and after instruction. Within the TPRS framework, learning indicators fall into three major domains: language, social–emotional, and motor skills.

In the language domain, three key areas are emphasized: listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and storytelling ability. Listening comprehension is demonstrated when children can follow simple story-based instructions, provide physical responses aligned with the storyline, and answer basic questions. Vocabulary acquisition is evident when children recognize and repeat key vocabulary items—either verbally or through actions—and show improved ability to use these words in appropriate contexts. Storytelling ability emerges when children can sequence story events, (Wright, Lloyd, Suchet-Pearson, Burarrwanga, & Tofa, 2012) retell the narrative in simple form, and produce new phrases through imitation of the teacher.

In the social–emotional domain, the indicators focus on learning engagement and language confidence. (Nurani & Yohana, 2019) Learning engagement appears through children's willingness to follow movements, imitate simple dialogues, show curiosity, and maintain attention during activities. Actively engaged young learners typically respond spontaneously to story events using expressions or body movements. Language confidence is shown when children dare to imitate words, answer teacher questions, or participate in retelling. TPRS strongly supports social–emotional development because it is playful, pressure-free, and allows children to learn in a natural and enjoyable manner.

In the motor domain, the emphasis is on movement coordination. Motor coordination develops as children follow movement instructions embedded in the storyline. They learn to match movements to word meanings—such as jogging lightly, opening their arms, jumping, or tapping. These activities strengthen both gross and fine motor skills while supporting sensorimotor integration, which is essential in early childhood development.

Beyond learning indicators, TPRS implementation generates observable outputs at both academic–pedagogical levels and practical classroom levels. In the academic–pedagogical dimension, the outputs include a TPRS activity model for kindergarten—consisting of storytelling and movement-based activities that teachers can directly apply. Another output is a conceptual learning framework, which explains how TPRS supports the development of listening, (Xie, 2021) vocabulary, and storytelling among young

learners. Additionally, lesson designs outline step-by-step activities from vocabulary introduction to retelling and reinforcement, giving teachers clear instructional guidance.

On the practical side, TPRS produces teacher implementation guidelines containing technical steps for effective and consistent application. Another output is a collection of story and movement materials, including sample story scripts, vocabulary lists, movement illustrations, and dialogue models used during learning activities. TPRS also generates child development assessment tools, such as rubrics or observation sheets designed to evaluate listening skills, story comprehension, engagement, storytelling ability, and motor responses. These instruments help teachers assess children's language development objectively and systematically.

The interconnected relationship between theoretical foundations, implementation processes, learning indicators, and instructional outputs illustrates that TPRS is a comprehensive, systematic, and research-based approach. The integration of comprehensible input, TPR, and storytelling positions TPRS as an approach that aligns naturally with early childhood developmental needs—where children learn through concrete experiences, emotional interaction, and physical activity. Therefore, TPRS not only provides a strong linguistic foundation but also enriches children's learning experiences through engaging and meaningful activities. This approach facilitates simultaneous development in language, social-emotional skills, and motor coordination, offering a practical and adaptable instructional model for English language learning in early childhood education settings.

2.1 Sustainable Learning Benefits

Konsep *Sustainable Learning Benefits* dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris anak usia dini melalui pendekatan *Total Physical Response Storytelling* (TPRS) merujuk pada manfaat belajar yang bersifat berkelanjutan, tahan lama, dan terus memberi dampak positif terhadap perkembangan bahasa anak meskipun sesi pembelajaran telah selesai. Keberlanjutan manfaat ini muncul karena TPRS memadukan input bahasa yang dapat dipahami, pengalaman fisik melalui gerakan, dan konteks cerita yang emosional, sehingga menciptakan jalur memori yang kuat dan alami pada anak. Ketika anak mengikuti cerita, menirukan gerakan, dan mengulang dialog sederhana, proses belajar tidak hanya terjadi pada tataran kognitif, tetapi juga motorik dan afektif, sehingga menghasilkan pemahaman yang stabil dan tidak mudah hilang. (Mitchell & Redmond, 1991) Eksposur berulang terhadap cerita dan gerakan memungkinkan anak menginternalisasi kosakata dan struktur bahasa secara bertahap dalam bentuk pembelajaran yang berkelanjutan.

TPRS menumbuhkan motivasi intrinsik karena pembelajaran berlangsung secara menyenangkan, bebas tekanan, dan dekat dengan dunia anak. Motivasi yang stabil ini menjaga keberlanjutan minat anak terhadap bahasa Inggris pada tahap-tahap berikutnya. Manfaat berkelanjutan juga tampak pada kemampuan anak untuk mengekspresikan diri secara lebih percaya diri, karena kegiatan bercerita dengan gerakan memperkuat aspek emosional pembelajaran dan membentuk rasa aman dalam berbicara. Dalam jangka panjang, kebiasaan memahami cerita, menirukan kosakata, dan merespons instruksi

melalui gerakan memperkuat fondasi literasi awal, membantu pengembangan kemampuan mendengar yang lebih tajam, serta menstimulasi kemampuan berpikir naratif. TPRS juga menciptakan keberlanjutan dalam hubungan sosial antara anak dan guru, karena interaksi dalam bentuk gerakan dan cerita memperkuat kedekatan, kenyamanan, serta keterikatan emosional yang mendukung pembelajaran jangka panjang.

Berkelanjutan tampak ketika guru dapat mengadaptasi cerita, memperkaya variasi gerakan, dan menerapkan TPRS secara konsisten sehingga memberikan pengalaman belajar yang terstruktur namun tetap kreatif. Dengan demikian, *Sustainable Learning Benefits* bukan hanya merujuk pada hasil akhir berupa kemampuan bahasa, tetapi juga pada proses belajar yang terus berlanjut, minat yang tetap terjaga, serta perkembangan kognitif, sosial-emosional, dan motorik yang saling mendukung dalam jangka panjang. Pendekatan TPRS pada akhirnya menghadirkan model pembelajaran yang tidak sekadar efektif sesaat, tetapi memberikan dasar bahasa Inggris yang kuat dan terus berkembang seiring pertumbuhan anak.

DISCUSSION

Several empirical studies confirm the positive effects of integrating movement and storytelling in children's language learning; however, their findings also reveal important differences in scope and limitation. (Er, 2013) demonstrates that Total Physical Response (TPR) effectively enhances young learners' motivation and basic vocabulary mastery through structured physical activities, positioning movement-based instruction as a strong entry point for early language exposure. (Nurani & Yohana, 2019) report improved post-intervention outcomes when TPRS was applied to mathematical vocabulary learning, indicating that combining movement with narrative can strengthen lexical comprehension. Nevertheless, these studies primarily focus on vocabulary gains and do not sufficiently address higher-order language skills.

Other research highlights methodological and conceptual limitations. (Prima, 2024) reports improved speaking skills in a TPR Storytelling group, yet the small sample size and limited research design restrict the generalizability of the findings. Likewise, Ibrahim (2024) finds that TPRS encourages greater oral language participation, but the short intervention duration and narrow participant scope limit conclusions regarding sustained or transferable language development. These constraints suggest that while TPRS shows promise, existing empirical evidence remains partial and context-bound.

Comparative analysis further reveals distinct contributions of TPR and storytelling. TPR consistently supports initial language comprehension through physical reinforcement of meaning (Er, 2013) whereas storytelling provides rich contextual input that facilitates thematic vocabulary development and meaning construction, particularly when children engage in retelling activities (Uzun, 2024). However, as noted by Yao et al. (2025), most narrative-based studies focus on older children and rarely integrate physical components, leaving early childhood applications underexplored.

When synthesized, these findings indicate that TPR and storytelling contribute differently to language development depending on the targeted skill. TPRS represents a

unique convergence of both approaches, simultaneously engaging children's physical, cognitive, and emotional learning mechanisms. Although some studies argue that TPRS is mainly effective for vocabulary acquisition and less substantiated for advanced narrative skills (Uzun, 2024), this limitation must be interpreted in light of early childhood learning characteristics, which prioritize concrete experiences, embodied interaction, and emotional engagement over abstract linguistic production.

This study contributes a critical perspective by positioning TPRS as a more holistic and developmentally appropriate model for early childhood English learning. By integrating movement and storytelling within a unified framework, TPRS offers greater potential to support listening comprehension, basic vocabulary mastery, learning engagement, and gradual readiness for simple storytelling. Compared to approaches that rely solely on movement or narrative, TPRS emerges as a more comprehensive pathway for early language acquisition and warrants further empirical investigation.

CONCLUSION

The implications of these findings indicate that *Total Physical Response Storytelling* (TPRS) has strong potential to inform policy development in early childhood English education by promoting play-based, movement-oriented, and meaningful learning approaches. In terms of teacher professional development, TPRS can serve as a reference framework for training programs that equip educators with the skills to design integrative, contextual, and developmentally appropriate language instruction. From a curriculum perspective, this approach supports the integration of physical activities and narrative elements into early childhood English learning design. Furthermore, future research should prioritize empirical studies with stronger experimental designs, broader participant coverage, and longitudinal analysis to examine the sustained impact of TPRS on children's language development and early literacy readiness.

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