

Total Physical Response as a strategy to improve the speaking skills of beginners EFL students in a rural Ecuadorian school

Respuesta Física Total (TPR) como estrategia para mejorar las habilidades de expresión oral de estudiantes principiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en una escuela rural ecuatoriana.

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Abstract

This study explores the transformations in oral skill development through the Total Physical Response (TPR) method among beginning English learners in a rural school in Manabí, Ecuador. In a context marked by the digital divide and high linguistic anxiety, the research adopted a qualitative phenomenological design with six



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participants from a multigrade institution. Through participant observation and field diaries, the findings demonstrate how the motor-linguistic scaffolding of TPR facilitates the dismantling of the affective filter, transforming initial selective mutism into emergent and spontaneous oral production. It is concluded that movement-based learning acts as a low-cost human educational technology, shaping the transition from the silent period to speech without the need for digital infrastructure. TPR is a strong and comprehensive method for understanding educational experiences in socioeconomically susceptible situations, according to the study.

Keywords: TPR, oral skills, rural education, affective filter, kinesthetic learning.

Resumen

El presente estudio investiga los cambios y transformaciones de las habilidades orales de los estudiantes principiantes de inglés de una escuela rural de la provincia de Manabí, por medio del método de Respuesta Física Total (TPR). Dentro de este contexto cuyo problema es la alta ansiedad lingüística, el estudio planteó un diseño cualitativo comprendido por 6 estudiantes de una escuela multigrado. Por medio de la observación participante y estudio de campo, los resultados importantes demuestran como el andamiaje motor-lingüístico del TPR facilita el desmantelamiento del filtro afectivo, transformando de esta forma el mutismo selectivo inicial en una producción oral emergente. Se llegó a la conclusión de que el aprendizaje que se basa en el movimiento actúa como una tecnología educativa humana de bajo costo, articulando la transición del periodo silente al habla sin la necesidad de infraestructura digital.

Palabras clave: TPR, habilidades orales, educación rural, filtro afectivo, aprendizaje kinestésico.

Introduction

In today's educational environment, learning English is of utmost importance. Beyond scholastic success, English proficiency is a tool for social mobility, job growth, and access to the global information economy in today's interconnected

world. As a result, educational institutions all over the world have included English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in their core curricula.

However, the pedagogical delivery of English instruction frequently runs into methodological and institutional problems. Traditional teaching methods, which frequently place an emphasis on rote memorization and passive, textbook-driven learning, have long dominated the EFL scene. These approaches frequently fall short of fostering strong communication skills, particularly in developing nations. Traditional methods can lead to settings of cognitive overload by emphasizing structural correctness over practical value. Students frequently become frustrated as a result, which makes it more difficult for them to participate in impromptu spoken conversations. Consequently, active, conversational, and kinesthetic approaches have become the new paradigm in education. These modern methods put the student at the center of the learning process.

Gavilanes Cuesta et al. (2024) claim that there are several benefits to using digital platforms in English classrooms. However, regional educational inadequacies continue to be determined by socioeconomic inequities. Academic prospects are directly impacted by the material disparity between urban and periphery institutions, which fosters educational inequality in rural areas.

Speaking anxiety is a major psychological obstacle for young EFL learners, according to Akdağ Çimen et al. (2022). Oral production requires the creation of a safe and stimulating environment. Implementing measures that move the emphasis from individual performance to low-stress, collaborative activity is crucial in rural areas.

In this regard, Abata et al. (2021) demonstrate that the Total Physical Response (TPR) methodology is effective for developing speaking skills in beginners within technology-limited environments. TPR emerges as a pertinent pedagogical solution, grounded in neuroscientific principles, that transforms resource scarcity into an opportunity for movement-based learning.

An assessment of recent research indicates that although TPR and active approaches have been investigated in Ecuador, comprehensive qualitative studies in remote rural areas are still uncommon. For instance, Freire Carrillo (2024)

found that TPR was useful in enhancing listening skills in the Sierra region, while Blanco Martell and Argudo Serrano (2025) examined motivational factors in the rural Amazonian borders.

Furthermore, research by Candrawati and Purbani (2025) highlights the need for non-technological strategies in rural settings across developing nations. However, there is a notable absence of qualitative ethnographic studies focusing on the transition from the "silent period" to emergent oral production among beginners in multi-grade, resource-deprived rural schools on the Ecuadorian coast. This gap marks the void of pedagogical knowledge that the present empirical study intends to fill.

Therefore, the main objective of this research is to understand the influence of the TPR method on the speaking skills of beginner students in a rural environment. Consequently, the present work seeks to provide well-founded answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the participants' initial level of speaking skills?
2. How is the Total Physical Response (TPR) method used to improve the speaking skills of the participants?
3. What transformations are experienced during the sessions with TPR in the speaking skills of the participants?

The first question examines how the fear of linguistic failure shapes the first stage and the impact of the affective filter on student confidence. The second question explores the feasibility of using motor scaffolding to build memory traces using the kinesthetic technique. Lastly, the final question explains the actual shift from receptive absorption to autonomous productive fluency.

Because it offers inclusive and useful instructional alternatives for vulnerable school environments, this work is significant. One sustainable way to improve training in underprivileged areas is to use TPR to encourage continued physical activity. Rural instructors can inspire pupils through experiential learning without the need for costly resources or internet infrastructure by confirming this method.

Finally, this article is framed within the research project 'Innovaciones pedagógicas e internacionalización de la formación de docentes para el desarrollo humano y sostenible'.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretive phenomenological design. This framework allows for a granular analysis of lived experiences and embodied actions, and linguistic responses within their natural socio-cultural context. The methodology prioritizes the nuances of classroom dynamics and the organic development of communicative competence over statistical quantification.

Participants

Six beginner-level EFL children (three females and three males) from a rural multi-grade school in an agricultural village, ages ten to twelve, made up the purposive cohort of participants. The use of a resource-independent approach like TPR is justified by the cohort's complete lack of prior formal EFL education, significant digital divide, and inadequate technological infrastructure.

To illustrate the demographic and technological profile of the group, the following table is provided:

Table 1. *Socio-Demographic and Technological Profile of Participants*

Demographic Variables	N° of Participants	Qualitative Descriptor
10 years old	2	Late childhood
11 years old	3	Pre-adolescence
12 years old	1	Early adolescence
Gender Distribution		
Female	3	Equitable representation
Male	3	Equitable representation
None (Absolute Beginner)	6	Zero prior specialized instruction
Home Technology Access		
Personal Computer / Laptop	0	Severe digital divide
Home Wi-Fi Connection	0	Absolute lack of connectivity
Shared Mobile Device (Limited Data)	6	Restricted access

Technics and materials

The primary technique utilized was Participant Observation, where the researcher acted as an active facilitator. The instruments used to systematize data were:

- a) **Observation Scheme & Field Diary:** Designed to systematize three categories: (a) Physical response to commands, (b) Reduction of the affective filter, and (c) Emergent oral production.
- b) **Qualitative Evaluation Rubric:** Prioritized lexical accuracy, communicative fluency, and pragmatic intelligibility over grammatical perfection.

Research Process

The investigation was conducted in four systematic phases:

Ethical and Preparatory Clearance: Following a discussion with parents and local authorities, consent and assent documents are signed.

Initial Diagnosis: Non-invasive observation to provide an initial assessment of oral production and anxiety levels (affective filter).

Pedagogical Implementation: Five 45-minute sessions are used to apply TPR. Activities progressed from basic motor imperatives to complex linked instructions and role-reversal (student as instructor), which served as the primary bridge to speech development.

Final Assessment & Analysis: Play-based speaking activities to identify or document transformative changes and boost oral confidence.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data was examined and comprehended using thematic and content analysis. Raw story data was open-coded and transcribed in order to identify emergent speech patterns and behavioral shifts. By comparing final assessment results (Phase 4), in-process field notes (Phase 3), and diagnostic observations (Phase 2), data triangulation was employed to confirm validity.

Ethical Considerations

Children and legal guardians provided informed consent, and the study adhered to the

Declaration of Helsinki. To protect participants' privacy and maintain anonymity, pseudonyms like Student 1 were employed.

Findings

The data gathered indicates a significant trend towards the pedagogical value of the TPR method. The findings have been methodically analyzed through three emergent themes that explain the transition from psychological paralysis to oral emergence.

Evolution of the Affective Filter (From Anxiety to Security)

Early findings showed a severely increased affective filter, marked by physical strain and selective mutism. This was demonstrated by Student 1 (S1), who hid behind a desk and said in L1, "Tengo mucha vergüenza, no sé qué decir, se reiran."

Nevertheless, the introduction of TPR sessions eliminated this anxiety. The classroom environment changed as the emphasis was shifted to silent physical conformity. As early as Session 2, students like S1 and S6 moved from guarded postures to active, smiling involvement, as the tracking matrix below illustrates.

Table 2. *Evolution of the Learning Experience*

St	Initial Level (Affective Filter)	Engagement with TPR (Intermediate stage)	Final Performance (Speaking Emergence)	Field Evidence (Verbatim / Action)
S1	Severe anxiety and a defensive stance. L1 dependence;	Reluctant grins and motor compliance. Active participation	Single-verb commands; confident loudness.	"Touch the desk!"
S2	anxious chuckles. Deep shyness and selective	and instant engagement. Gradual participation and	No hesitation, complex chained commands. Clear nouns and late	"Jump to the window!"
S3	mutism. Initially indifferent and	reliance on peers. High level of gamification	speaking emergence. Better clarity and	"Walk to the door."
S4	disengaged.	involvement.	projection of the voice.	"Run to the chair!"

S5	L1 annoyance; reluctance to participate. Stiff and tense; quiet and obedient.	Uncrossed arms, self-whispering. Physical release of tension.	Proficiency with spatial prepositions. Fluid combinations of objects and actions.	"Put the pencil on the book." "Sit down and touch your nose!"
S6				

Development of Motor-Linguistic Competence (Kinesthetic Association)

Theme 1: Development of Motor-Linguistic Competence (Kinesthetic Association)

The core mechanism relied on neuro-scaffolding—anchoring phonetic sounds to muscle memory. By Session 3, students executed complex sequences (e.g., "walk to the door, touch the red apple") with zero reliance on Spanish.

But there were challenges along the way: abstract prepositions like "behind" and "between" created some ambiguity, and S3 required extra time to break the silent period. This shows that while TPR works well with tangible concepts, abstract mapping requires constant reinforcement.

Emergence of Oral Production (The Transition to Speech)

Theme 2: The Change from Oral to Speech Production

The crucial moment occurred in Session 4 during the role-reversal exercises. Because there were low risks, students felt powerful and voluntarily broke their silence. S2, who had been quiet previously, yelled, "Jump to the window!" as she made her way to the middle. This transition from receptive assimilation to autonomous speaking was characterized by improved voice projection and the end of anxious stuttering.

Synthesis of Triangulated Evidence

The character of the pedagogical encounters is confirmed by the observed reality throughout all sessions, as summarized in the accompanying table. This is the basis for the discussion that follows.

Table 3. *Analysis Categories and Triangulated Evidence*

Theme of Analysis	Main Finding (Observed Reality)	Triangulated Evidence across Instruments
Affective Filter (Anxiety Reduction)	The classroom climate shifted radically from a paradigm of paralyzing fear, silence, and academic stress	The diagnostic journal recorded "defensive body language, crossed arms, and heavy L1 reliance." The observation checklist for the fourth

	to an environment of physical play, emotional safety, and peer collaboration.	session noted " <i>voluntary participation from all participants, continuous laughter, absence of visible stress indicators.</i> "
Kinesthetic Association (Motor-Linguistic)	Students were able to avoid L1 translation and directly encode English words into long-term muscle memory by using gross motor activity as strong neuro-scaffolding.	Without the necessity for L1 translation or physical resistance, students were observed in intermediate field notes chaining up to three successive motor cues (such as leap, walk, and touch) on their own.
Emergent Oral Production (Speaking)	Students used the physical instructions as their basic, low-stress linguistic framework to effortlessly move from a protracted time of immobility to spontaneous, understandable speech.	Final evaluation qualitative rubrics revealed notable improvements in vocal projection, diaphragm breath control, and phonetic intelligibility during unprompted peer-to-peer commanding exercises.

Discussion

This section summarizes localized empirical findings within the present scholarly debate, explaining how the changes seen in these six students either support or advance our current knowledge of EFL instruction in situations with limited resources.

Rural Educational Challenges and the Technological Gap

Geographical dispersion, deteriorating infrastructure, and a lack of technology resources are some of the long-standing issues facing school administration in rural Ecuador, according to Padilla Eras (2024). Due to this reality, digital learning platforms cannot be implemented, which exacerbates the digital gap and maintains educational marginalization.

The difficult challenges of teaching multiple grades exacerbate this injustice. Teachers in these situations frequently encounter severe regulatory restrictions and lack specialized methodological training, as Carbo-Ramírez (2025) explains. As a result, they often fall back on textbook-based approaches that don't interest pupils (Zambrano-Trujillo et al., 2022). According to Yunga Albán et al. (2025), rural

students frequently see English as a static obligation rather than a living tool, which contributes to the "apathy" seen in the early stages of this study.

In environments devoid of technology, educators must demonstrate extreme adaptability (Candrawati & Purbani, 2025). The richness of the TPR experience serves as a powerful counter-narrative to these deficits. By utilizing the students' bodies as the primary pedagogical resource, the study proves that high-impact learning can occur independently of digital infrastructure through what Ballesteros Carmona (2025) calls "physical creativity."

The Affective Filter and Speaking Anxiety

The qualitative evidence of "selective mutism" and defensive posturing in Students 1 and 3 confirms the crippling effects of the Affective Filter. Akdağ Çimen and Çeşme (2022) underscore that toxic stress—driven by a fear of social penalty—systematically blocks the neurological pathways required for language processing. Negative affective factors, such as impoverished academic self-concept and fear of forced exposure, create formidable psychological resistance (Silva López & Morales Vázquez, 2023; Orosz et al., 2021).

By eliminating the need for instantaneous oral output, the TPR intervention vigorously addressed this paralysis. The approach established a "safe environment" in which the teacher served as an emotional facilitator by substituting physical play for compulsion (Romero Zárate & Santana Valencia, 2024). This transition from fear to delight is consistent with research by Pilamunga Caluña et al. (2025), which shows that kinesthetic activities reduce anxiety by taking into account learners' innate inclinations. Joy is a requirement for learning, according to Alvear et al. (2023); in this study, the "joyful distraction" of gamification broke down the wall of fear.

TPR and Physical Gamification as Learning Strategies

TPR's status as a transformational pedagogical approach is supported by the empirical evidence (Abata et al., 2021). Through neuro-scaffolding, kids assimilated English by linking words to gross motor skills. According to Putri et al. (2025), motor gamification takes use of the neurological link between long-term memory and muscle action. Compared to static chalkboard instruction, this multimodal engagement—

visual, aural, and kinesthetic—creates a memory trace that is more durable (Hooli, 2022).

This psycholinguistic impact reduces cognitive load and eliminates classroom monotony (Al-Obaydi & Pikhart, 2024). Combining TPR with tangible objects (realia) makes the process highly efficient, allowing students to reach a "state of flow" (Siregar, 2025). The transition from the silent period to spontaneous speech in Session 4 was facilitated by this foundation; by embodying the language, students bridged the gap toward verbal communication naturally (Parra Martínez & Villacrés Camino, 2025).

Finally, considering the macro-educational shifts in Ecuador, teachers in isolated areas remain the ultimate gatekeepers of quality education (Stinson, 2022). In this landscape, TPR empowers rural educators by providing a zero-cost, scientifically validated framework. This study proves that effective teaching is a product of methodological ingenuity rather than material wealth.

Conclusion

The qualitative analysis of this intervention yields critical conclusions that directly address the research questions established at the onset of this study:

The study confirms that the initial state was characterized by a critically elevated affective filter, manifested through selective mutism, defensive posturing, and toxic academic stress. This psychological paralysis, rooted in a fear of peer mockery and linguistic failure, confirmed that traditional, decontextualized teaching methods do not resonate with the lived reality in rural settings. The findings establish that before any linguistic acquisition can occur, the teacher must first dismantle these emotional barriers.

The study offers strong proof that TPR is an effective neuro-linguistic scaffolding in situations with limited resources. The approach made the students' bodies the main teaching tool by emphasizing physical cooperation above early oral accuracy. This strategy demonstrated that instructional innovation in the Global South relies more on methodological creativity than on digital infrastructure by enabling participants to avoid L1 translation and encode words directly into long-term muscle memory.

A successful transition from a protracted silent phase to emergent oral production was made possible by the intervention. By Session 4, students were able to spontaneously

issue understandable verbal commands due to the structural adequacy of the physical embodiment of words. The most noticeable shift was the "unforced" quality of their speech: pupils were able to break through the barrier of linguistic fear by articulating English with vocal projection and no obvious nervousness when they were empowered through role-reversal.

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