

Use of the Total Physical response method in teaching English as a Foreign Language: A systematic review

Uso del método de respuesta física total en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera: una revisión sistemática



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Abstract

This systematic review examined the use of Total Physical Response (TPR) in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), with particular emphasis on the Ecuadorian context and its relationship to international pedagogical trends. The study sought to identify evidence regarding the effectiveness of TPR across diverse educational settings. Following PRISMA guidelines, twenty studies were analyzed, including ten Ecuadorian publications (2022–2026) and ten international studies from Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Data were organized through analytical matrices and interpreted using a hermeneutic approach. The findings revealed consistent positive effects of TPR on vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, learner motivation, classroom participation, and anxiety reduction. Although the strongest evidence was found in preschool and primary education, several studies also reported benefits for adolescents and adult learners, particularly during the initial stages of language acquisition. In

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Sinergias educativas

July - September Vol. 11 - 3 - 2026
<http://sinergiaseducativas.mx/index.php/revista/>
eISSN: 2661-6661
revistasinergias@soyuo.mx
Page 34-49
Received: February 24 , 2026
Approved: May 10 , 2026

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Ecuador, TPR appears especially valuable due to its practical, low-cost, and engaging nature, which makes it suitable for classrooms with diverse needs and limited resources. However, the review also indicates that TPR should be complemented with other methodologies at more advanced proficiency levels. Overall, the evidence supports TPR as a flexible and pedagogically relevant strategy in contemporary EFL instruction.

Keywords: Total Physical Response, English as a Foreign Language, systematic review, vocabulary acquisition, communicative competence, Ecuador.

Resumen

Esta revisión sistemática examinó el uso del método Total Physical Response (TPR) en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), con especial énfasis en el contexto ecuatoriano y su relación con tendencias pedagógicas internacionales. El estudio buscó identificar evidencia sobre la efectividad del TPR en diversos entornos educativos. Siguiendo las directrices PRISMA, se analizaron veinte estudios, incluidos diez artículos ecuatorianos publicados entre 2022 y 2026 y diez investigaciones internacionales procedentes de América Latina, Europa, Asia y África. Los datos fueron organizados mediante matrices analíticas e interpretados a través de un enfoque hermenéutico. Los hallazgos revelaron efectos positivos consistentes del TPR en la adquisición de vocabulario, la comprensión auditiva, la motivación de los estudiantes, la participación en clase y la reducción de la ansiedad. Aunque la evidencia más sólida se encontró en educación inicial y primaria, varios estudios también reportaron beneficios en adolescentes y adultos, especialmente durante las etapas iniciales de adquisición del idioma. En Ecuador, el TPR parece especialmente valioso debido a su carácter práctico, económico y dinámico, lo que lo convierte en una opción adecuada para aulas con necesidades diversas y recursos limitados. Sin embargo, la revisión también indica que el TPR debe complementarse con otras metodologías en niveles de mayor dominio lingüístico. En general, la evidencia respalda al TPR como una estrategia flexible y pedagógicamente relevante en la enseñanza contemporánea del inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: Respuesta Física Total (TPR), inglés como lengua extranjera, revisión sistemática, adquisición de vocabulario, competencia comunicativa, Ecuador

Introduction

In recent decades, the significance of English globally has encouraged numerous countries to enhance foreign language instruction by reforming curriculum and adopting creative teaching methods. In Ecuador, crucial educational reforms integrated English as a Foreign Language (EFL) into the national curriculum starting from the second grade of primary education through to higher education, with the purpose of improving students' communicative competence and international opportunities (Villafuerte & Mosquera, 2020; Zambrano Caballero et al., 2022). These reforms included the creation of a national curriculum, the implementation of teaching standards, the requirement for teachers to reach a B2 proficiency level, and the expansion of English instruction across various educational stages (Soto et al., 2017; Intriago et al., 2019).

Despite these advances, the teaching of English in Ecuador still faces important challenges. Classrooms often have large numbers of students, different levels of language proficiency, limited access to technology, and minimal interaction with real English outside of academic settings. In this context, the successful implementation of communicative approaches and learner-centered methodologies often depends on teachers' methodological preparation and the availability of practical classroom strategies (Villafuerte & Mosquera, 2020).

Among the methods used in EFL education, Total Physical Response (TPR), developed by James Asher, has received considerable attention. TPR is based on the coordination of language and physical movement, allowing learners to respond to verbal input through actions before producing spoken language. This sequence reflects natural language acquisition processes in which comprehension precedes production (Rambe, 2019). Previous research have reported that TPR may reduce anxiety, increase motivation, and improve vocabulary retention by creating dynamic and low-stress learning environments (Castro et al., 2025; Nieto-Herrera et al., 2026). In addition, Andrade Gallo and Jara Escobar (2026) highlight that movement-based learning may be especially effective for young learners because it aligns with developmental stages that require concrete and interactive experiences.

International evidence has also supported the relevance of TPR in diverse contexts. Investigations from Europe, Asia, and Africa have identified favorable results in vocabulary acquisition, learner participation, and listening comprehension, suggesting that

movement-based instruction remains valuable across different educational systems (Hooli et al., 2023; Larab & Kerkadi, 2024; Sari & Syamsuyurnita, 2026). However, although TPR has been widely discussed internationally, limited research has systematically synthesized its effectiveness within the Ecuadorian EFL context or compared local findings with international trends.

Consequently, this systematic review aims to investigate the application of the Total Physical Response method in teaching English as a Foreign Language and to identify evidence relating to its effectiveness across different educational contexts. The review was guided by the following research questions: (1) How has the TPR method been implemented within the Ecuadorian EFL context, and how do these practices align with international pedagogical trends? (2) What evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of TPR in developing communicative skills in EFL learners?

Materials and methods

This research is guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) framework, which represents a rigorous methodological standard designed to enhance transparency, reproducibility, and methodological integrity in evidence synthesis. The PRISMA model was selected because it allows the selection of studies to be conducted through a systematic and verifiable process, reducing inconsistencies and biases in reporting systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021; Zambrano Caballero et al., 2025).

The study utilizes a dual-layered selection approach. First, an analytical matrix was established, consisting of 10 high-impact Ecuadorian articles published between 2022 and 2026. These articles were sourced from indexed databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and SciELO to evaluate the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method within the national context. Second, ten additional international studies from Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Africa were selected to support the background section and provide a global comparative perspective.

To ensure explicit documentation of the review process, a PRISMA flow diagram was incorporated to guide the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of the selected studies. The application of these procedures contributed to minimizing selection

bias and strengthening the reliability of the conclusions derived from heterogeneous sources (Sánchez Serrano et al., 2022).

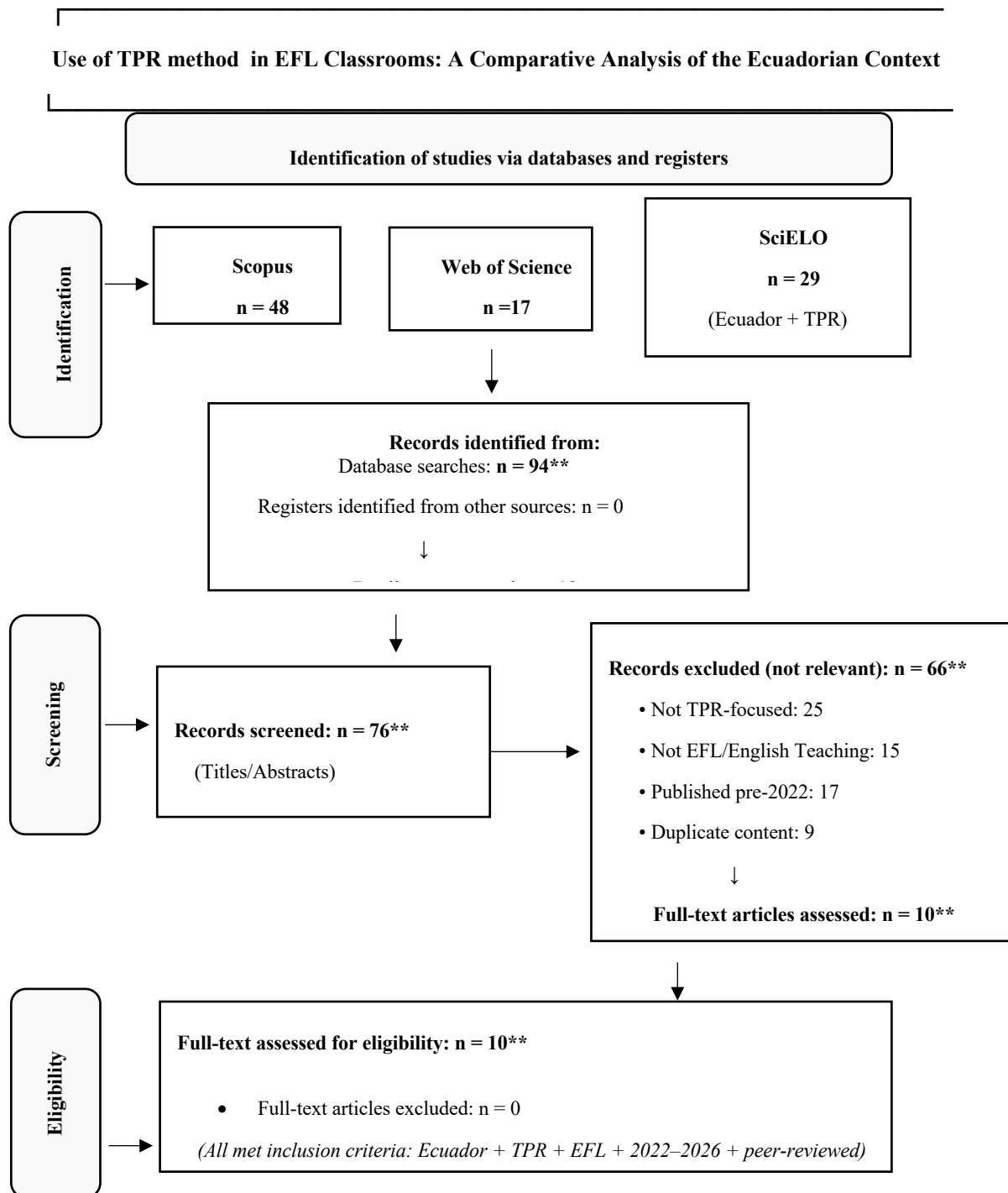
In addition to this framework, the hermeneutic method was used to interpret the evidence, with emphasis on the relationship between text, context, and researcher understanding. Using the hermeneutic circle, the analysis moved continuously between individual findings and the broader pedagogical meaning of the studies reviewed (Espinoza Freire & Ley Leyva, 2020) . This process allowed the evidence to be interpreted not only descriptively but also conceptually, in relation to language learning processes and educational practice (de Franco & Faneite, 2024; Muñoz, 2021).

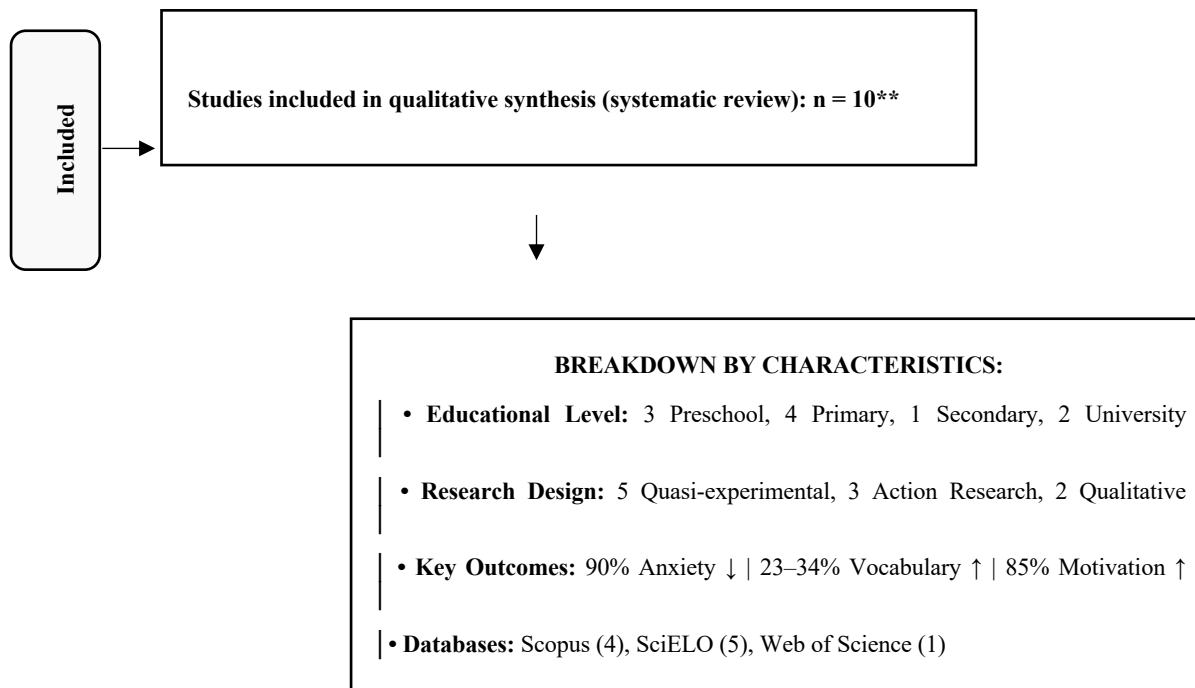
A structured search strategy was designed using Boolean operators and key terms in both English and Spanish:

- English search string: “Total Physical Response” AND “EFL” AND “Latin America” OR “Europe” OR “Asia” OR “Africa” AND “listening” OR “vocabulary”.
- Spanish search string: “respuesta física total” AND “enseñanza de inglés”.

The filters applied during the search process included the publication period (2022–2026), peer-reviewed journal articles, and full-text availability.

Graphic 1. PRISMA 2021 Flow diagram





Design: PRISMA, 2021

Results

The analysis included twenty studies selected through the review process: ten Ecuadorian articles and ten international studies from Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. The selected studies covered preschool, primary, secondary, and university contexts. Overall, the findings revealed a consistent positive impact of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method on vocabulary learning, listening comprehension, learner motivation, and classroom participation.

Ecuadorian TPR Research:

Matrix 1. *Analysis of Ecuadorian Articles*

Author(s) / Year	Institution / Context	Key Findings (Main Results)	Critical Pedagogical Interpretation
Brito Arichábala (2022)	CHIP – Ambato / Primary School	Boosts speaking skills effectively by providing a low-anxiety environment that encourages spontaneous communication through a solid physical foundation.	As Acosta Cotrina (2023) states, TPR reduces the emotional barrier, allowing the voice to emerge after processing the language through action.
Pallo Ayala & Rosero Herrera, (2023)	UTC - Pujilí (Rural Public Schools)	TPR acted as an equitable pedagogy in rural areas, boosting motivation in students with limited access to resources.	According to Larab & Kerkadi, (2024), the body compensates for technical limitations and empowers the teacher as a living, democratic, and pedagogically safe linguistic model.
Acurio Acurio & Rivadeneira Cepeda, (2023)	UTC – Pujili (7th Grade Students)	85% of students perceived TPR as "fun and easy," emphasizing that stress-free environments promote confidence.	This strategy, supported by Velázquez Garriga (2025), rebuilds self-efficacy by eliminating verbal stress, ensuring a natural transition from comprehension to expression.
Poalacin & Aysalla (2024)	UTC – Latacunga (8th Grade “Upper Basic”)	Effectiveness in vocabulary retention reached 85%, significantly higher than the 65% achieved with traditional methods.	In agreement with Utami et al. (2025) physical action prevents cognitive fatigue in children, successfully encoding vocabulary in procedural memory.
Freire Carrillo (2024)	UNACH – Riobamba (University Level) (A1)	Achieved a statistically significant improvement in listening (p-value: 0.000000302), raising scores from 5.39 to 6.42.	Following Sari & Syamsuyurnita (2026) , embodied learning allows knowledge to flourish through a motor and emotional engagement that is meaningful.
Morocho & Lojano (2024)	UNAE – Azogues / 5th Grade (Public School)	Effectively addresses student disinterest caused by traditional routine methods, improving communicative confidence.	As Bayona Ángel (2023) indicates, formalizing movement transforms the classroom into an active ecosystem of memory, where physical participation is essential.
Yuquilema Mullo (2024)	UTA – 5th Grade (Public School)	Significant vocabulary acquisition was observed, transforming the teacher into a "director" and the student into a "performer".	According to Acosta Cotrina (2023), physical action serves as a universal transcultural bridge that humanizes the educational process in diverse global contexts.
Castro et al. (2025)	University of Guayaquil – Early Childhood / Elementary	TPR is highly effective in initial learning stages, facilitating direct word-action association while significantly lowering anxiety.	The results, validated by Hooli et al. (2023), confirm that movement guarantees lexical retention by acting as an essential neuro-cognitive bridge.

Nieto-Herrera et al. (2026)	UPSE - Santa Elena (Beginner University Students)	90.5% reported enhanced memory and speaking comfort rose from 19.0% to 88.1%, significantly reducing anxiety.	In line with Hooli et al. (2023), the use of the method in adults mitigates academic stress, humanizing language acquisition at a higher level.
Andrade Gallo, & Jara Escoba (2026)	UPSE - Santa Elena (Elementary /Public School)	Resulted in a significant increase in vocabulary retention and academic performance through meaningful connections.	Adapting instruction to the child's energy level creates, according to Velázquez Garriga (2025), a bridge to the abstract, transforming teaching into a solid foundation.

The Ecuadorian research consistently reported positive effects of TPR, particularly in vocabulary learning, motivation, and listening comprehension. Most studies were conducted in primary education settings, where movement-based activities increased participation and reduced learner anxiety. These findings suggest that TPR is especially valuable in contexts that require practical and low-cost teaching strategies.

International TPR Research:

Similar results were identified in international contexts. Studies from Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America reported improvements in vocabulary retention, learner engagement, and confidence. This consistency strengthens the relevance of TPR across different educational systems and supports the findings identified in Ecuadorian classrooms.

Matrix 2. Analysis of International Articles

Author(s) / Year	Institution / Context	Key Findings (Main Results)	Critical Pedagogical Interpretation
Acosta Cotrina (2023). Peru.	National University of Cajamarca / Secondary School	93% success in listening and 60% in speaking through speech-action coordination.	As Hooli et al. (2023) , Grandez Huamán y Usquiza Torres (2023) argue, movement reduces anxiety in adolescents, transforming the body into a functional cognitive engine.
Grandez Huamán & Usquiza Torres, (2023)Peru.	IESP Amazonas / Secondary School	Qualitative leap from "Beginning" to "Outstanding" in listening and lexical mastery.	In line with (Sari & Syamsuyurnita, 2026), embodied learning allows knowledge to flourish through a motor and emotional engagement that is meaningful.
Bayona Ángel (2023). Colombia.	UNAD / 5th Grade Primary	Significant improvement in attitude and vocabulary acquisition after the gaps caused by the pandemic.	This strategy, supported by Velázquez Garriga (2025), rebuilds self-efficacy by eliminating verbal stress, ensuring a natural transition from understanding to expression.

García Sandoval & Guzmán-Sierra (2023)	Univ. Pedagógica / 2do Grado	High effectiveness in acquiring basic vocabulary through active imitation workshops.	In agreement with Utami et al. (2025) physical action avoids childhood cognitive fatigue, successfully encoding the lexicon in long-term procedural memory.
Colombia.			
Hooli et al. (2023).	University of Granada / University	Improved self-confidence and social cohesion in adults through physical activity.	In line with Grandez Huamán y Usquiza Torres (2023), the use of the method in adults mitigates academic stress, humanizing language acquisition in higher education.
Larab & Kerkadi (2024).	Ibn Khaldoun University / 4th Grade	Conscious use of motor strategies drastically increased school motivation and recall.	As Bayona Ángel (2023) indicates, formalizing movement transforms the classroom into an active ecosystem of memory, where physical participation is essential.
Aldana Benítez (2025).	UNAD / Teachers and Children	Strengthened English commands in non-specialist teachers via immersive experiences.	According to Larab & Kerkadi (2024), the body compensates for technical limitations and empowers the teacher as a living, democratic, and pedagogically safe linguistic model.
Velázquez Garriga (2025).	University of La Laguna / 4th Grade	Effective inclusion of students with SEN (Autism/Asperger's) and educational equity.	Following Hooli et al. (2023) , the method represents an act of justice; the body transcends cognitive barriers, guaranteeing belonging and dignified learning.
Utami et al. (2025).	Indraprasta University / Initial	27% increase in understanding abstract concepts (numbers) in children aged 3-4.	According to Velázquez Garriga (2025), adapting instruction to the child's energy state creates a bridge to the abstract, transforming teaching into a solid foundation.
Sari & Syamsuyurnita (2026).	Muhammadiyah University / Secondary School	Increase in lexical proficiency from 36% to 88% in a multicultural context (BIPA).	According to Acosta Cotrina (2023), physical action serves as a universal transcultural bridge that humanizes the educational process in diverse global and multicultural contexts.
Thailand.			

The evidence presented in both matrices revealed a consistent positive impact of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in English as a Foreign Language instruction. Across Ecuadorian and international contexts, the most frequent benefits were related to vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, learner motivation, and active classroom participation. These findings were reported at different educational levels, including preschool, primary, secondary, and higher education contexts.

At the same time, some studies highlighted limitations related to advanced proficiency levels, overcrowded classrooms, limited

instructional time, and insufficient teacher training. Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that TPR remains a flexible and valuable methodology, particularly during the early stages of language learning and in contexts that require practical, engaging, and low-cost teaching strategies.

Discussion

The purpose of this systematic review was to examine how the Total Physical Response (TPR) method has been implemented in the Ecuadorian EFL context and how these practices relate to international pedagogical trends, as well as to identify evidence of its effectiveness in developing communicative skills. Based on the reviewed studies, the keywords that emerged most frequently across both research questions were vocabulary, listening, motivation, participation, confidence, movement, retention, and adaptability. These recurring terms reflect the main pedagogical contributions associated with the method.

In response to the first research question, the findings suggest that the implementation of TPR in Ecuador follows patterns similar to those reported internationally. In Ecuadorian classrooms, TPR has mainly been applied in preschool and primary education through commands, gestures, songs, role-play, and movement-based vocabulary activities. These practices are consistent with studies from Asia, Europe, and Latin America, where physical response has also been used to facilitate early language learning and increase student engagement. This similarity indicates that Ecuadorian teachers are adopting methodologies aligned with broader international trends in learner-centered instruction.

Meanwhile, the Ecuadorian context gives TPR special relevance. Many local classrooms operate with large groups, mixed proficiency levels, and limited access to technological resources. Under these conditions, TPR appears to be especially valuable because it does not depend on expensive materials and can transform the body itself into a learning resource. Therefore, beyond following international practices, the method may respond directly to practical needs within the national educational system.

In relation to the second research question, the reviewed evidence consistently supports the effectiveness of TPR in developing communicative skills, particularly vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension. Students generally showed stronger

retention of new words when language was linked to movement, while listening skills improved through repeated exposure to commands and oral input. Although speaking development was less immediate, several studies suggested that oral production increased progressively once learners had gained confidence and comprehension. This supports the principle that receptive skills often precede productive skills in early language learning.

Another relevant theme identified in the analysis was the emotional impact of TPR. Terms such as confidence, motivation, and participation were frequently mentioned in both Ecuadorian and international studies. This suggests that the method contributes not only to language development but also to a more positive classroom environment. When students are given the opportunity to respond physically before speaking, fear of making mistakes may decrease, creating safer conditions for participation. These findings are especially relevant in EFL contexts, where anxiety often limits oral interaction.

The results also show that TPR may not be equally effective across all instructional stages. Its strongest benefits are more evident among beginner and younger learners, while advanced students may require additional approaches that support abstract language use, critical thinking, reading, writing, and spontaneous communication. For this reason, TPR seems most effective when combined with communicative, task-based, or collaborative methodologies rather than applied on its own.

Taken together, the discussion indicates that TPR continues to be a useful and flexible method in current EFL classrooms. In Ecuador, it reflects international teaching trends while also responding to local classroom realities. TPR supports not only vocabulary and listening development, but also greater confidence, participation, and motivation among learners. These results suggest that TPR remains valuable when used as part of a balanced approach that responds to different teaching contexts.

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