

The effectiveness of total physical response in vocabulary learning for a1 students: A literature review

La eficacia de la respuesta física total en el aprendizaje de vocabulario para alumnos de A1: una revisión bibliográfica

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Abstract

This literature review investigates the impact of the command-based learning approach called TPR on vocabulary acquisition among A1 learners. It used the qualitative method to examine twenty scientific studies to demonstrate the method's impact on learner motivation and vocabulary retention. This synthesis includes studies published in academic journals over the last five years using a qualitative review methodology. The information extracted was gathered into themes about retention, motivation, cognitive and psychological benefits, limitations of the approach, and steps for good implementation. The discussion section presents some important outcomes, such as: TPR facilitates the activation of long-term memory due to its interactive methodology, making students recall vocabulary easily. Furthermore, the TPR method boosts motivation when teachers use amusing physical activities, helping reduce the stress of learning a second language. Additionally, it helps improve the cognitive processes of the right side of the brain because of the comfortable learning environment. On the other hand, this method does not work well for teaching complex vocabulary.

Keywords: TPR; vocabulary; learning; motivation; retention

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Resumen

Esta revisión bibliográfica investiga el impacto del método de aprendizaje basado en órdenes denominado TPR en la adquisición de vocabulario entre alumnos de A1. Utiliza el método cualitativo para examinar veinte estudios científicos con el fin de demostrar el impacto del método en la motivación del alumno y la retención de vocabulario. Esta síntesis incluye estudios publicados en revistas académicas en los últimos cinco años utilizando una metodología de revisión cualitativa. La información extraída se agrupó en temas sobre retención, motivación, beneficios cognitivos y psicológicos, limitaciones del enfoque y pasos para una buena aplicación. La sección de discusión presenta algunos resultados importantes, como: El TPR facilita la activación de la memoria a largo plazo debido a su metodología interactiva, haciendo que los alumnos recuerden el vocabulario con facilidad. Además, el método TPR aumenta la motivación cuando los profesores utilizan actividades físicas divertidas, ayudando a reducir el estrés que supone aprender una segunda lengua. Además, ayuda a mejorar los procesos cognitivos del lado derecho del cerebro debido al cómodo entorno de aprendizaje. Por otro lado, este método no funciona bien para enseñar vocabulario complejo.

Palabras clave: TPR; vocabulario; aprendizaje; motivación; retención

Introduction

It has been proven that interactive teaching methods are the most efficient way to teach a new language since they encourage participation and foster encouraging learning environments (Zaynitdinovna, 2024). Furthermore, motivated students have more possibilities to learn a second language than those who are not focused on it (Gömleksiz, 2001). Additionally, Total Physical Response (TPR) is one of these approaches that is notably successful at improving vocabulary acquisition through movement and active responses. By stimulating face-to-face interaction with language, TPR improves retention, reduces anxiety, and fosters a positive learning environment (Xie, 2021).

A child learns their mother tongue through language-body talks in which they physically follow their parents' instructions. Following this concept, Dr. James J. Asher created the TPR method, which integrates language and physical activity to learn a second language (Frost, n.d.). Also, children learn a language by listening and imitating their parents' actions before speaking (Asher, 1972). Moreover, a good amount of vocabulary and a relaxed learning environment help students of a second language improve their speaking performance (Karim et al., 2023).

The researchers suggest that if the apprentice first attains a high listening comprehension level, the transition to speaking can be easy and without trauma (Asher, 1969). Effective listening comprehension is the first step to help the learners understand grammar, intonation, and meaning. Furthermore, by acquiring the fundamentals of listening skills, children can reach their full potential, reduce anxiety, and improve learning considerably (Bekmurodova & Umida, 2024). The students begin to learn a new language, they belong to the A1 level.

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the A1 students are the beginners with basic knowledge of the language. They need vocabulary to understand and use familiar words, basic everyday expressions and instructions, ask and answer simple questions, and make simple sentences (Council of Europe, 2020).

For learning a second language, it is necessary to have the capacity to grasp and recall a considerable amount of vocabulary (Surmanov & Azimova, 2020). In addition, a varied vocabulary is essential to understand written content and convey thoughts. A well-structured vocabulary speeds up the learning of a second language considerably (ЛИЦЕВКО, 2024). Knowing that Total Physical Response is an active learning methodology for teaching basic vocabulary. Additionally, this method must be tested on A1 learners to check its effectiveness and viability in the classroom.

Although TPR is recognized as an interactive approach to teaching English vocabulary, this teaching methodology has not had sufficient studies on its impact on word acquisition for A1-level pupils. In addition, poor writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills are because of an inability to grasp English vocabulary, which is thought to be a major barrier to language learning (Jungal Arrobo & Guamán Luna, 2024).

In order to strengthen vocabulary acquisition, many innovative approaches have been created, but it is required to find the right methodology to teach vocabulary to novice students since traditional approaches to teaching English vocabulary to young pupils prove inadequate (Putri & Taslim, 2024). On top of that, further research is required to examine TPR's role in promoting long-term vocabulary retention and learner motivation, even though its efficacy is widely accepted. Other approaches such as TPR need to be explored to guarantee better learning results, as conventional approaches are not often sufficient to engage young learners effectively (Putri & Taslim, 2024).

With its useful implications for educators and curriculum developers, this analysis boosts the field of language education since individual differences are crucial when teaching a foreign language. Additionally, considering that every single student has a different learning style, the teacher must know many methodologies and apply the right ones to have good outcomes in the teaching process (Abdullaev, 2021). More importantly, this paper underlines how to take advantage of this methodology to create an effective plan to teach vocabulary to novice learners.

Consequently, the main goal of this integrative literature review is to study English vocabulary acquisition using the Physical response method with A1-level English language learners. This study has two questions. First, what impact does TPR have on A1 learners' vocabulary retention? Second, what impact does TPR have on learners' motivation to acquire new words?

Methodology

This integrative review was performed using a qualitative method to analyze the impact of the Total Physical Response approach on vocabulary acquisition; the principal research databases that were used by this paper were Google Scholar and ERIC (Education Resources Information Center). Moreover, some relevant terms were used to search for the articles in the academic research databases, such as Total Physical Response (TPR), A1 students, language learning strategies, vocabulary retention techniques, learner motivation in EFL (English as a Foreign Language), and

EFL teaching approaches. Additionally, a total of twenty papers related to the topic of this article were gathered. Besides, it was read one by one to search for the key findings.

The instrument applied in this research paper was an article review guide, which helped to identify 20 articles focusing on themes related to the impact of TPR on vocabulary retention, motivation toward the method, cognitive benefits, as well as limitations, and steps for its implementation.

Inclusion Criteria:

It included papers that mainly focus on A1 level students and vocabulary development published between 2021 and 2025; also, it should be Peer-reviewed journals, and another requirement was that it has to be published in the English language.

Exclusion Criteria:

It (table 1) excluded studies that do not pertain to vocabulary or TPR. Another aspect that was taken into account was that it was not published earlier than five years ago. On the other hand, theses were also excluded from this study and finally, articles published in other languages were excluded as well.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Conditions	Inclusion	Exclusion
Article focus	TPR, A1 students, students, and vocabulary development	Articles that do not pertain to vocabulary or TPR
Date of publication	Last five years	Published earlier than five years ago.
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journals	Theses
Language	English	Non-English

Source: own elaboration

Development

This integrative review aims to gather information about key aspects of the Kinesthetic Language Learning approach named TPR from twenty articles of the last five years from 2021 to 2025 and then join the findings into themes including: vocabulary retention using TPR; motivation through TPR; TPR and its cognitive and psychological benefits; limitations of TPR; and good implementation of TPR. Subsequently, it makes a presentation of the results. Table 2 makes a discussion of these findings mainly answering the two questions that were set previously.

Table 2. Analysis of the articles

Authors	Goal	Country	Type of Research	Research Method	Type
Duan (2021).	To examine how successful TPR is in preschool children through a class that lasts 4 months.	China	Research camp	Quantitative and empirical	Article
Inciman Celik et al. (2021).	To study the main aspects that influence the students' ability to acquire vocabulary of a second language	Turkey	Literature review	Mixed/method	Article
Itmeizeh & Ibnian (2022).	To verify the repercussions of the Communicative Teaching approach and the Action-based learning method related to aspects of students' psychology and pedagogy.	Saudi Arabia	Literature review	Descriptive-analytical	Article
Utami et al. (2025).	To examine the impact of the TPR approach in teaching numbers to children.	Indonesia	Literature review	Qualitative	Article
Salma & Wafa (2024).	To scrutinize how the utilization of TPR can impact language acquisition	Indonesia	Classroom action research	Mixed method	Article
Al-Obaydi & Pikhart (2024).	To explore the level of influence of the TPR method in word learning.	Iraq	Classroom action research	Mixed method	Article
Sumarni et al. (2022).	To study the connection between students and the Active Learning approach.	Indonesia	Field Study	Qualitative	Report
Farisatma (2023).	To investigate the interactive learning method and its impact on vocabulary acquisition.	Indonesia	Field Study	Quasi Experimental Design	Index publication
Widiyarti & Fitriani (2023).	To examine the influence of teaching basic vocabulary employing Total Physical Response.	Indonesia	Ground Research	Qualitative	Paper
Nguyen et al. (2021).	To evaluate the young learners' vocabulary acquisition and efficacy through TPR.	Vietnam	Pedagogical field study	Combined Technique	Academic paper
Husanović (2022).	To study word learning with the help of TPR	Bosnia	Teacher-research	Integrated approach	Study

Authors	Goal	Country	Type of Research	Research Method	Type
Nguyen (2022).	To investigate the attitudes of children learning vocabulary through TPR.	Vietnam	Research on education	Interpretative approach	Scientific paper
Pramesti (2021).	To investigate the effect of the interactive learning approach on students with hyperactivity disorder.	Indonesia	Study on field	Descriptive	Academic report
Liu & Chen (2021).	To investigate the impact of vocabulary learning through the interactive teaching method on primary school boys.	Indonesia	Participatory research	Blended approach	Scientific document
Hutahaean et al. (2024).	To investigate the students' vocabulary proficiency level and its repercussions generated by the use of TPR.	Indonesia	Teaching investigation	Combined Technique	Academic file
Widyatmoko et al. (2023).	To investigate the students' disposition and degree of grasping of vocabulary with the use of the interactive learning methodology.	Indonesia	Field analysis	Statistical	Scholarly paper
Ali et al. (2023).	To observe and make a critical review of the number of commands that students can learn with the use of the dynamic teaching approach.	Indonesia	Teaching approach research	Descriptive approach	Scientific composition
Celik et al. (2021).	To research the aspects affecting the efficiency of mastery vocabulary using Total Physical Response.	Turkey	Literature review	Combined technique	Journal paper
López Vélez & Villafuerte Holguin (2021).	To improve the blending between Neuroeducation and the motion-body-based foreign language learning approach.	Ecuador	Field research	Fused approach	Scientific publication
Anila & Parlikad (2024).	To evaluate the interactive activities included in the active language teaching method, such as dancing, acting, and contests.	India	Field scientific investigation	Interpretative process	Journal document

Source: own elaboration

Results

According to Table 3, among the countries that developed more investigation about the TPR approach is Indonesia with ten research papers, the rest of the countries such as China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Vietnam, Bosnia, India, and Ecuador just did one or two papers from 2021 to 2025. It shows that there are not enough investigations about the effectiveness of the TPR related to memory retention of basic English vocabulary and motivation toward the learning process using this interactive methodology.

Table 3. Quantity of TPR studies per country in the period from 2021 to 2025

Country	Number of TPR studies	Country	Number of TPR studies
Indonesia	Ten scientific studies	Vietnam	Three academic articles
China	One research article	Bosnia	Two scholarly document
Turkey	A journal article	India	One Research analysis
Saudi Arabia	One research paper	Ecuador	One Academic investigation
Iraq	One academic file		

Source: own elaboration

As shown in Table 4, Total Physical Response is effective in vocabulary retention because of its interactive learning process, which helps easily understand and remember the vocabulary learned in every lesson, as indicated by Utami et al. (2025); Sumarni et al. (2022); Farisatma (2023); Nguyen et al. (2021); Salma & Wafa (2024); Celik et al. (2021) and Itmeizeh & Ibnian (2022). Students can improve their vocabulary retention significantly because of the movement of the body which helps to activate long-term memory.

Table 4. Effectiveness of TPR in Vocabulary Retention

Author	Findings
Utami et al. (2025).	Students' vocabulary retention and acquisition are improved by the TPR method.
Sumarni et al. (2022).	Students can significantly improve their vocabulary retention through an interactive learning process with the Total Physical Response Method.
Farisatma (2023).	By involving students' bodies in the learning process Total Physical Response helps them easily understand and remember vocabulary improving long-term memory retention.
Nguyen et al. (2021).	The translation method does not significantly improve vocabulary acquisition as much as Total Physical Response does.

Author	Findings
Salma & Wafa (2024).	When the Active learning approach is used regularly, the students' vocabulary retention skills improve in a really good way.
Celik et al. (2021).	Vocabulary acquisition using the body movement method produces outstanding results.
Itmeizeh & Ibnian (2022).	The interactive learning techniques used by Total Physical Response help to activate long-term memory.

Source: own elaboration

The data in Table 4 show that the Total Physical Response methodology boosts learners' motivation when it comes to learning new vocabulary because of its enjoyable activities that help them motivate and engage in every activity of the learning process, as mentioned by Duan (2021); Al-Obaydi & Pikhart (2024); Widiyarti & Fitriani (2023); López Vélez & Villafuerte Holguin (2021); Widyatmoko et al. (2023); Ali et al. (2023); Inciman Celik et al. (2021) and Celik et al. (2021). TPR not only enhances motivation but also improves vocabulary retention because this learning environment is dynamic and stimulating.

Table 5. The impact of TPR on Learner Motivation

Author	Findings
Duan (2021).	TPR has an interesting and enjoyable methodology, which boosts children's motivation to learn a foreign language.
Al-Obaydi & Pikhart (2024).	Total Physical Response increases student engagement and excitement in a foreign language classroom and notable improvements are observed in areas such as spelling vocabulary growth and retention.
Widiyarti & Fitriani (2023). December	The body movement learning approach can successfully enhance the motivation and retention of vocabulary in students.
López Vélez & Villafuerte Holguin (2021).	English learning motivation is increased by dancing and physical activities which are components of the Total Physical Response approach.
Widyatmoko et al. (2023).	The interactive learning approach keeps students highly motivated with the single goal of learning new vocabulary.
Ali et al. (2023).	By increasing language learners' motivation and excitement Total Physical Response enhances the teaching process.
López Vélez & Villafuerte Holguin (2021).	The active learning method boosts enthusiasm in students and encourages them to take an active role in the process.
Inciman Celik et al. (2021).	The physical interactive participation of students in class sparks their enthusiasm and fosters their interest in the learning process.
Celik et al. (2021).	For language learners, the Total Physical Response method promotes motivation and a sense of comfort.

Source: own elaboration

As noted in Table 5, TPR has cognitive and psychological benefits because this approach reduces stress and creates a calm atmosphere which favors the learning process in two ways:

motivation and retention, as observed by Itmeizeh & Ibnian (2022); Farisatma (2023); Al-Obaydi & Pikhart (2024) and Pramesti (2021). TPR which emphasises physical movement and low-pressure activities minimizes anxiety and promotes well-being for language acquisition.

Table 6. Cognitive and Psychological Benefits of TPR

Author	Findings
Itmeizeh & Ibnian (2022).	The student's right side of the brain is stimulated by using Total Physical Response which engages processes like feelings imagination creativity art fiction and visualization.
Farisatma (2023).	Students can more easily learn understand and retain vocabulary when Total Physical Response reduces their stress and anxiety and makes the lesson more fun and engaging.
Itmeizeh & Ibnian (2022).	The physical involvement of learners in the interactive learning approach makes them feel secure because it does not oblige them to interact verbally immediately.
Al-Obaydi & Pikhart (2024).	Teachers should foster a positive classroom environment while utilizing Total Physical Response to help students develop their emotional intelligence.
Pramesti (2021).	The dynamic learning technique fits great for students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder because of their physical interaction nature.

Source: own elaboration

As indicated in Table 6, Total Physical Response has some limitations and challenges that inhibit its full potential, as highlighted by Inciman Celik et al. (2021); Liu & Chen (2021); Nguyen (2022) and Duan (2021). The authors state that TPR is not suitable for teaching complex vocabulary as it focuses on physical actions. Besides, it is difficult to apply in overcrowded classrooms due to the limitations to performing physical activities and individual participation.

Table 7. Limitations and Challenges of TPR

Author	Findings
Inciman Celik et al. (2021).	The participatory learning approach cannot be implemented effectively in overcrowded classrooms.
Inciman Celik et al. (2021).	Behavioral problems a lack of resources big class sizes and shy students are some of the factors that affect how effective the Total Physical Response method is.
Liu & Chen (2021).	A single Total Physical Response session with too many students moving around could cause mental overload and classroom fatigue.
Nguyen (2022).	Overuse of mandatory drills and tedious learning activities causes most students to lose interest and become discouraged.
Duan (2021).	The incapacity of the TPR method to teach intricate phrases and complex vocabulary effectively is one of its main drawbacks.

Source: own elaboration

As observed in Table 7, TPR should be implemented mainly with young learners using enjoyable commands following some steps in order to have better results, as reported by Salma & Wafa (2024); Ali et al. (2023); Liu & Chen (2021); Duan (2021); Nguyen et al. (2021); Husanović (2022) and Anila & Parlikad (2024). The authors emphasize that teachers should demonstrate the commands, incorporate games and songs, and integrate playful elements to maintain students' interest and motivation. However, the limitations and challenges are related to the number of students, behavioral problems, lack of resources, shyness, level of vocabulary, and overuse of TPR.

Table 8. Best Practices for Implementing TPR

Author	Findings
Salma & Wafa (2024).	The collaborative learning approach must be implemented following sequential steps such as planning action, observation, and reflection, which help students gain new vocabulary easily.
Ali et al. (2023).	Total Physical Response is divided into two primary stages: instructors demonstrate the command to students first and then students execute it on their own to show that they have understood and learned it.
Liu & Chen (2021).	Total Physical Response is a more effective way to teach vocabulary in English.
Duan (2021).	Children's long-term memory retention is improved when language and movement are combined during foreign language instruction.
Nguyen et al. (2021).	One method is Total Physical Response which does not require at-home practice. It facilitates students' easy retention of word meanings.
Ali et al. (2023).	Young students are especially well-suited for Total Physical Response.
Husanović (2022).	Using Total Physical Response helps young learners understand information better.
Anila & Parlikad (2024).	Engaging activities like games and dance are part of Total Physical Response which teachers should use to enhance student learning.
Anila & Parlikad (2024).	Through entertaining and engaging activities Total Physical Response improves students' English language proficiency.
Anila & Parlikad (2024).	Cooperation and interaction during the language learning process are what lead to language acquisition and Total Physical Responses engaging activities foster these qualities.

Source: own elaboration

Discussion

This section focuses mainly on the research questions about the impact of TPR on A1 level learners' vocabulary retention, and the impact of TPR on learners' motivation to acquire new words. This discussion also takes into account some other themes such as best practices for the implementation of TPR, limitations of TPR and cognitive, and psychological benefits of TPR.

According to the data, Total Physical Response enhances the retention of new English vocabulary in A1 learners. The findings indicate that TPR helps enhance long-term memory as noted by Itmeizeh & Ibnian (2022) and Farisatma (2023). This can be because the interactive learning process plays a crucial role in vocabulary retention, as mentioned by Sumarni et al. (2022) and Utami et al. (2025).

On the other hand, this study also shows that there are some challenges of Total Physical Response method. Nguyen et al. (2021), highlight that students get bored when the teacher overuses the same commands. Similarly, Duan (2021), reported that Total Physical Response has no suitable results when it comes to teaching complex vocabulary and difficult phrases. The findings show that teachers should combine TPR with other methodologies to get better results in teaching a second language.

As reported by Ali et al. (2023), Duan (2021) and Al-Obaydi & Pikhart (2024), confirm Total Physical Response boosts motivation in students who use this method to learn new vocabulary. On top of that, the level of motivation is further improved when teachers use physical activities for instance dancing as reported by López Vélez & Villafuerte Holguin (2021).

TPR helps effectively reduce the stress of learning a foreign dialect. Inciman Celik et al. (2021), found that students feel relaxed and ready to learn when the learning environment is comfortable. However, Nguyen (2022), mentions that in order to keep students engaged, teachers must appropriately use different commands, considering that repetitive activities could lead to students' apathy and loss of interest. These findings indicate that students must be taught through TPR using different and enjoyable activities in order to keep their interests alive.

Psychological and cognitive aspects are influenced by the use of TPR. Itmeizeh & Ibnian (2022), reveal that better memory retention is possible because TPR affects in an advantageous way the memory processes of imagination and emotion, which are cognitive functions of the right side of the brain. Furthermore, Farisatma (2023), stresses that Total Physical Response creates a comfortable learning environment by shrinking anxiety and stress.

Additionally, the TPR approach fits well with the necessities of students with attention deficits. Pramesti (2021), mentions that one of the best methods to teach students with Attention Deficit Disorder is TPR because it decreases distractions and keeps them motivated due to its participatory nature.

Limitations of TPR

TPR has many benefits, but in the same way has some challenges by the time it is applied in classrooms. Inciman Celik et al. (2021), mention that TPR can increase classroom fatigue and some students can show inappropriate behavior when it is applied in overcrowded classrooms. On top of that, Nguyen (2022) and Duan (2021), state that TPR has shown some limitations in order to teach complex vocabulary and difficult phrases to learners. Furthermore, they state that repetitive activities can cause students to lose interest.

TPR may not adapt well for all kinds of students. Inciman Celik et al. (2021), mention that TPR can have limited effects on students who present issues such as shyness and bad behavior. Due to these findings, teachers must make a test to recognize the different styles of learning of the students, so in this way, apply the right method to each student.

Best practices of TPR's implementation

Taking into account that TPR has to be applied in the classroom with specific sequential steps in order to boost its effectiveness. Salma & Wafa (2024), state that TPR requires some sequential steps as follows: preparation, implementation, monitoring, and reflection. Furthermore, Ali et al. (2023), propose that educators must perform the command in front of the students so they can see it and imitate the procedure autonomously.

The diversity of physical actions and amusing activities proposed by TPR promotes students' engagement in the learning process. Anila & Parlikad (2024), suggest that teachers should include many different activities, such as dance and captivating games, in order to retain students' interest in the instruction process. Beyond that, Nguyen et al. (2021), mention that the active learning approach is effective because students have no need to make extra practice at home with the same commands learned in the classroom.

Recommendations

TPR should be implemented in the classroom following two specific steps. First, teachers must perform the command in front of the students, and second, students must carry out the command by themselves in order to see if they grasped the idea.

To keep students motivated toward learning new vocabulary, teachers must create different, enjoyable, and amusing activities.

Teachers should look for ways to integrate Total Physical Response with other approaches to have outstanding results in the teaching process.

Teachers should create different and enjoyable activities for students with different styles of learning to improve their engagement and motivation toward the learning process.

Educators should create effective commands to manage effectively overcrowded classrooms and students' behavior.

Schools should encourage teachers to improve their capabilities in implementing Total Physical Response and other approaches in the classroom.

Future studies should investigate the activation of long-term memory of TPR applied to other fields of teaching such as mathematics.

Conclusion

The findings confirm that the approach based on interactive commands called TPR is an effective method for improving vocabulary retention. On the other hand, if the teacher uses the same commands all the time, the students lose interest in the learning process. Furthermore, it is less effective in order to teach complex phrases and difficult vocabulary; for this reason, teachers must look for other approaches in order to combine with TPR so that way have excellent results. Additionally, TPR boosts students' motivation when the teacher uses different and amusing activities such as dancing, contests, etc., which reduce anxiety and stress levels in pupils, making them ready to learn a second language or a foreign language. On top of that, the interactive teaching process of TPR aims to activate the cognitive functions of the right side of the brain, which involve emotion and imagination. Not only that, TPR is a good method for students with concentration problems because this approach lets them interact in the instructional process and minimizes distractions, thus improving their level of interest in the procedure of knowledge acquisition. It should be mentioned that TPR has some disadvantages, as it lessens its effectiveness with students who present behavioral problems and shyness conditions. Moreover, TPR does not work well in overcrowded classrooms. TPR must be used following two specific steps: first, the teacher must perform the command in front of the students; second, the students need to see the physical action of the instructor and execute the command by themselves. Finally, students do not need to make additional practice at home of the commands learned in the classroom because this method impacts the level of retention of the pupil.

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