

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The effectiveness of the total physical response (tpr) method in teaching vocabulary to a2-level EFL learners

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Abstract. Vocabulary is a fundamental pillar of language competence, and for learners at the A2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the challenge of building a functional lexical store is both urgent and concrete. This article examines the effectiveness of Total Physical Response (TPR) — a method developed by James Asher that links language input directly to physical action — as an approach to vocabulary instruction for A2-level EFL learners. Drawing on meta-analytic evidence, classroom-based research, and theoretical accounts of how TPR supports vocabulary acquisition, the article addresses three organising questions: what vocabulary TPR is best suited to teach, who benefits most from TPR instruction at the A2 level, and how TPR should be implemented to maximise vocabulary gains. The meta-analysis by Celik et al. (2021), which yielded an overall effect size of 1.131 across 13 studies, provides the quantitative foundation for the argument that TPR is not merely a motivational strategy but a demonstrably effective vehicle for vocabulary learning — one whose particular strengths align closely with the needs and characteristics of A2-level EFL learners.

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Introduction

When James Asher developed Total Physical Response in the 1970s at San Jose State University, he drew on a deceptively simple observation: that children acquire their first language not by studying it but by responding to it — listening, understanding, and acting before they ever speak (Samieva, 2016). Commands such as “stand up,” “turn around,” and “point to the window” are not merely classroom instructions; they are the raw material of early language acquisition, pairing sound and meaning with visible, memorable physical responses. Asher’s insight was that this natural pathway — comprehension before production, action before articulation — could be replicated in the second-language classroom to accelerate vocabulary learning and reduce the anxiety that so often accompanies it.

For learners at the A2 level of the CEFR, who have crossed the threshold of basic English but whose vocabulary remains limited and fragile, the question of

how to build a larger and more reliable lexical store is among the most pressing concerns of language instruction. This article argues that TPR offers a well-evidenced and practically viable answer to that question. To make the case, it addresses three questions in turn: what vocabulary TPR is best suited to develop at the A2 level; who among A2-level EFL learners stands to benefit most from TPR instruction; and how TPR can be implemented in the classroom to produce durable vocabulary gains. Across these three questions, the article draws on Asher’s original theoretical framework as described by Samieva (2016), the meta-analytic synthesis of TPR research conducted by Celik et al. (2021), experimental findings reported by Liu et al. (2024), and practical guidance from the Board of Education of the City of New York (1994).

What to Teach: Vocabulary Best Suited to TPR

TPR is not a general-purpose vocabulary method that can be applied with equal ease to any word in the English lexicon. Its defining characteristic — the pairing of language input with physical response — makes it especially well suited to a particular category of vocabulary: words whose meaning can be enacted, demonstrated, or pointed to. Action verbs form the natural core of TPR-based vocabulary instruction. Words such as stand, sit, walk, run, jump, open, close, pick up, put down, point, touch, look, listen, and write lend themselves directly to physical demonstration: the teacher says the word and performs the action, and learners immediately perceive and internalise the connection between sound and meaning through their own bodies rather than through translation or definition.

Beyond action verbs, TPR handles concrete nouns effectively when they can be made physically present or pointed to: classroom objects such as a book, a chair, a window, and a door; body parts such as head, shoulder, arm, and knee; and everyday items that can be brought into the classroom or represented by realia. Celik et al. (2021) identify the use of pictures and realia — alongside songs, stories, and games — as

among the ten analytical themes consistently associated with successful TPR vocabulary instruction across 13 studies. This evidence suggests that the physical environment of the A2 classroom can be treated as a vocabulary resource in its own right: every object in the room is a potential target word, and every routine action the teacher performs is an opportunity for lexical input.

The vocabulary most urgently needed at the A2 level is precisely the high-frequency, concrete, and everyday language that TPR handles best. A2 learners typically command a passive vocabulary of 500 to 1,000 words and need to expand it toward the 2,000 most frequent English word families that form the functional core of everyday spoken and written communication. Many of the words in this high-frequency band — particularly the verbs and concrete nouns that populate everyday speech — are exactly the words that can be taught through physical response. The alignment between what A2 learners need to learn and what TPR is structurally equipped to teach is thus not coincidental: at this level, the method’s natural affordances serve the learner’s genuine vocabulary needs.

Who Benefits: A2-Level EFL Learners and the Case for TPR

The A2-level EFL learner is defined by the CEFR as someone who can understand frequently used expressions relating to familiar areas and communicate in simple, routine tasks. Beneath this description lies a learner population that is heterogeneous in many respects — in age, in learning context, in prior lan-

guage experience, in preferred learning style — but shares several characteristics that make TPR a particularly appropriate instructional approach.

The first of these characteristics is the reliance on the classroom as the primary, and often the only, source of English input. EFL learners at the A2 level, studying in countries where English is not the lan-

guage of daily life, rarely encounter the target language outside the classroom in ways that systematically build vocabulary. This places considerable pressure on classroom instruction to supply what the environment does not, and it makes deliberate, teacher-guided vocabulary teaching especially important. TPR addresses this need directly: by presenting vocabulary through structured physical routines, it creates the kind of rich, multi-sensory encounter with new words that makes them memorable and reduces dependence on rote translation.

The second characteristic is anxiety. Many A2-level learners carry a significant degree of language anxiety, particularly around speaking, and this anxiety impedes vocabulary acquisition by narrowing attention and reducing the willingness to engage with new material. Asher's method was designed with this in mind: the initial silent period of TPR, during which learners respond physically to commands without being required to speak, removes the pressure of oral production and allows the new vocabulary to be processed in a lower-stakes environment (Samieva, 2016). The Board of Education of the City of New York (1994) explicitly identifies TPR as a strategy for learners who are struggling in language-rich but supportive classrooms, noting its value for reducing the cognitive and affective demands of early vocabulary learning.

The third characteristic concerns age and the capacity for kinesthetic engagement. Celik et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis disaggregates its overall effect size of 1.131 by learner age, finding an effect size of 0.942 for

young learners and a notably higher effect size of 1.717 for adult learners. Both figures represent large and meaningful advantages for TPR over comparison conditions, and both apply to EFL settings. The finding that adult learners show particularly strong gains under TPR is worth dwelling on: it challenges any assumption that TPR is primarily a method for young children, and suggests that the bodily, kinesthetic engagement it entails is effective across the age range. For A2-level EFL classrooms, which may include learners from elementary school through adulthood, this breadth of applicability is an important practical advantage.

A fourth relevant characteristic is ability level within the A2 band. Liu et al. (2024) found that while traditional TPR — in which the teacher provides the gestures that learners imitate — is more effective for lower-ability learners, a personalized TPR approach — in which learners create their own gestures for new words — produced significantly greater gains for higher-ability students (post-test mean of 80.31 for the experimental group versus 42.75 for the control group, $F(1, 72) = 12.75$, $p = .00$). This finding has an important implication for A2-level instruction: the A2 band contains learners at different points within the level, and a differentiated approach — offering structured, teacher-led TPR to those with weaker foundations while extending personalized, student-generated gesture to those with stronger ones — can serve the full range of learners within the same classroom.

How to Teach: Implementing TPR for Vocabulary Gains

The theoretical grounding of TPR rests on three interconnected hypotheses that Asher developed to explain why linking language to physical action supports acquisition (Samieva, 2016). The first is the bioprogram hypothesis: that human beings are biologically prepared to acquire language through a sequence that begins with listening and responding before it moves to speaking, just as infants comprehend and act on language long before they produce it. The second is the brain lateralization hypothesis: that physical, motor-based activity engages the right hemisphere of the brain, which complements the left hemisphere's role in analytical language processing, and that this bilateral engagement deepens the memory trace left by a new word. The third is the stress-reduction hypothesis: that a method which requires no speaking at the outset and no explicit error correction reduces the affective filter that blocks language acquisition in anxious learners. Together, these three hypotheses predict that vocabulary learned through physical response will be acquired faster, retained

longer, and recalled more readily than vocabulary learned through purely cognitive means — a prediction that the meta-analytic evidence broadly supports (Celik et al., 2021).

In practice, a TPR-based vocabulary lesson at the A2 level typically moves through three phases. In the first phase, the teacher models both the language and the action, saying each target word or phrase aloud while performing the corresponding movement: "Stand up" (stands up), "Sit down" (sits down), "Turn around" (turns around). Learners observe without pressure to respond. In the second phase, the teacher issues the commands and learners respond physically, gradually performing the actions without seeing the teacher's model. The teacher monitors responses, provides corrective feedback through redemonstration rather than explicit correction, and varies the pace and sequence of commands to maintain attention. In the third phase, individual learners or pairs take over the role of commander, issuing instructions to classmates and observing their re-

sponses — a role-reversal that moves learners from comprehension toward production and consolidates the vocabulary through active retrieval.

Celik et al.'s (2021) synthesis of best practices across 13 studies identifies several implementation features associated with stronger vocabulary outcomes. Class size matters: groups of 24 or fewer allow the teacher to monitor physical responses and provide timely corrective feedback. The physical and emotional environment should be stress-free and supportive, with emphasis on participation rather than correctness. Songs, stories, and games embedded within TPR sequences extend and vary the vocabulary encounter beyond the basic command-response cycle. Written forms of target words should be introduced alongside or following the physical activity, so that learners connect their embodied knowledge of a word's meaning to its orthographic representation — a connection that supports both reading and spelling at the A2

Conclusion

The three questions that organise this article — what to teach, who to teach, and how to teach — converge on a coherent and evidence-based account of TPR as a vocabulary instruction method for A2-level EFL learners. What TPR teaches most effectively is the concrete, high-frequency vocabulary — action verbs, tangible nouns, classroom commands — that forms the foundation of the 2,000-word lexical core A2 learners need most urgently. Who benefits most from TPR instruction are precisely those learners whose characteristics align with the method's strengths: A2-level EFL learners who rely on the classroom for vocabulary input, whose language anxiety makes silent, action-based engagement preferable to immediate spoken production, and whose varying ability levels within the A2 band can be served by differentiating between traditional and personalized TPR. How TPR should be implemented, at its best, involves a structured three-phase progression from teacher modelling to guided physical response to learner-generated

level. Pair work provides additional production opportunities and distributes the cognitive load of command-giving across the class.

Liu et al. (2024) add a further layer of implementation guidance through their comparison of traditional and personalized TPR. In their study of Taiwanese elementary EFL learners working with 40 target words drawn from nursery songs, they found that asking learners to generate their own gestures for new words — rather than imitating the teacher's gestures — produced significantly higher post-test scores for learners at higher ability levels. The act of creating a personal gesture requires the learner to think deeply about the meaning of the word, to find a movement that captures that meaning, and to commit the connection to memory in a highly individual and therefore memorable way. For A2 learners who are ready to take a more active role in their own vocabulary learning, this personalized variant of TPR represents a natural and evidence-supported extension of the method.

production, supported by a stress-free environment, manageable class sizes, rich sensory materials, and systematic attention to the written forms of target words.

The quantitative foundation for these conclusions is substantial. Celik et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis of 13 studies yielded an overall effect size of 1.131 — classified as strong by conventional standards — with statistically significant results across both young and adult learner populations ($z = 5.62$, $p < 0.01$). Liu et al.'s (2024) experimental findings demonstrate that personalized TPR can push vocabulary gains significantly higher still for capable learners. Taken together, these results make a compelling case: for A2-level EFL learners who need a structured, memorable, and motivating path to vocabulary growth, TPR is not a supplementary activity to be deployed occasionally for variety but a principled instructional method whose effectiveness the evidence firmly supports.

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