

COMPARING THE AUDIO-LINGUAL METHOD AND TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE IN THE MODERN EFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, classical teaching methods such as the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) and Total Physical Response (TPR) have long histories but are often overlooked in favor of communicative and task-based approaches. This article compares ALM and TPR, exploring their theoretical foundations, strengths and weaknesses, and how they can be adapted for modern multilingual classrooms. Drawing on recent empirical studies (especially from 2021–2025), the discussion shows how ALM’s emphasis on habit formation and drill complements TPR’s embodied learning and kinesthetic involvement. The comparison is enriched by classroom reflections illustrating how a hybrid approach can balance accuracy and fluency, reduce learner anxiety, and increase engagement. Implications for teacher practice, curriculum design, and assessment are offered.

Keywords: Audio-Lingual Method, Total Physical Response, EFL, learner engagement, pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition and embodied learning.

In many parts of the world, English is taught in classrooms that are multilingual, examination-oriented, and constrained by limited time. Teachers tend to favor methods that promise communicative competence rapidly, and often ALM and TPR are either neglected or considered only suitable for children. Yet both methods carry pedagogical value and potential when re-examined. ALM offers precision and structured reinforcement through drills; TPR brings physical movement, embodied comprehension, and learner motivation. The question then becomes: How can ALM and TPR be compared and possibly integrated so that their respective strengths can counterbalance their limitations? This article explores that question, drawing on recent studies and classroom practice, in order to argue for a hybrid teaching approach that situates accuracy, fluency, and engagement all together.

Audio-Lingual Method (ALM)

Originating in the mid-20th century, ALM is based on behaviorist psychology (stimulus → response → reinforcement). It emphasizes repetition, pattern drills, mimicry, pronunciation, and dialogues. Habit formation is central. ALM was widely used especially in military and language institute settings. Over time, however, communicative language teaching (CLT) critiqued ALM for its lack of authentic communicative contexts and its neglect of meaning and learner agency. Recent empirical studies reaffirm parts of ALM's value. For example, *The Effectiveness of Audio-Lingual Method on Students' Pronunciation Performance* (Ash'ari et al., 2022) showed that ALM significantly improved English pronunciation among secondary school students compared to conventional methods. Similarly, *Enhancing Speaking Skills: The Impact of the Audio-Lingual Method on Eighth-Grade Students* (Hermansyah & Mothe, 2025) demonstrated ALM's positive effects on accuracy, fluency, and comprehension in speaking.

Total Physical Response (TPR)

TPR was developed by James Asher in the 1960s and is rooted in the idea that language learning, particularly for beginners or young learners, can be more effective when input is combined with physical movement. The method exploits commands, bodily gestures, actions, and delays speaking until comprehension is established. Recent work confirms TPR's efficacy. For instance, "Improving English Vocabulary for Elementary School Students using Total Physical Response (TPR) Method" (Salsabila, 2021) found significant improvements in vocabulary among elementary learners using TPR. *The Effectiveness of the TPR Method in Enhancing Students' Vocabulary* (Putri et al., 2023) similarly indicates that young learners respond well to TPR in vocabulary mastery. Also, case studies like "The Effectiveness of Total Physical Response (TPR) on Teaching English to Young Learners" (Xie, 2022) reveal both strengths and practical constraints.

Comparative Analysis: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Contexts

Dimension	Strengths of ALM	Weaknesses of ALM	Strengths of TPR	Weaknesses of TPR

Repetition/ Habit Formation	Very strong: drills, dialogues, mimicry help pronunciation and structure accuracy.	Can be boring; may not promote creative language use; less attention to meaning or fluency.	Less repetition of grammar; focuses more on comprehension and physical response. Good for retention of vocabulary with action.	Limited grammatical complexity; may not develop advanced speaking well; may be over-reliant on imperatives.
Pronunciation & Accuracy	High potential: ALM emphasizes correct pronunciation from early on.	Risk of fossilization; pressure on students; may demand too much precise mimicry.	Can assist with phonological awareness if actions accompany intonation and rhythm; helps reduce anxiety.	Physical actions can distract or be hard to coordinate; not always focused on fine phonetic details.
Engagement & Motivation	Can be motivating for learners who like structure and clarity.	If over-used or dry, drills can demotivate; no sense of autonomy or creativity.	High engagement: movement, games, songs, actions attract interest; helpful for young learners.	May feel “childish” or simplistic for older students; not always seen as serious by exam-oriented curricula.
Fluency & Communicative Competence	Usually weaker: speaking in ALM is	Producing spontaneous or creative	Better for comprehension and initial confidence;	Less practice in free speaking; may not prepare

	largely controlled and scripted.	utterances is challenging.	may lead to better listening and receptive skills.	learners for varied real-life interactions.
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While a hybrid approach promises many benefits, there are important factors:

1. **Overemphasis on drill** (ALM) may lead to rote learning without real communicative competence.
2. **TPR’s limits**: Not all structures or vocabulary suit TPR; things like abstract concepts are harder to embody physically.
3. **Learner differences**: Older learners may resist being told to move or act; cultural norms might make movement difficult. Also, learners with physical disabilities require adaptation.
4. **Resource constraints**: Time, classroom space, class size, and teacher training all affect viability. Also, high-stakes exams tend to favor traditional grammar/vocabulary and writing tasks, meaning TPR and ALM may be marginalized unless assessment changes.
5. **Ethical aspect**: Ensuring students’ dignity and comfort is key; making sure that physical participation is voluntary; being sensitive to cultural norms about behavior in class.

ALM and TPR each bring valuable pedagogical possibilities to modern EFL classrooms. ALM contributes precision, clear pronunciation, reinforcement of grammatical structures — TPR offers engagement, physical embodiment, lower anxiety, and strong early comprehension. The best classroom practice may lie in a hybrid approach that deliberately plans when to use each, balancing accuracy and fluency, form and meaning. For teachers, this means designing lessons with both movement and drill; for curricula, it means recognizing these methods in syllabi and assessment; for teacher education, it means building capacity in both methods. By moving “from habit to action”, learners can acquire not just correct forms but also communicative confidence and deeper understanding.

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