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Total Physical Response and Early Language Development: Integrating Motivation, Action, and Reward in Pandemic Pedagogy

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Abstract

This article examines the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in early English language learning during the Covid-19 pandemic by integrating the Motivation–Action–Reward framework. The study addresses the pedagogical challenges caused by the abrupt transition to online learning, which often reduces children's motivation, engagement, and vocabulary acquisition. Using a descriptive qualitative method with a mini classroom ethnography approach, the research involved 15 children aged 5–6 years at TK Kristen Caritas Ambon. Data were collected through participant observation, documentation (photos, videos, anecdotal records), and informal interviews with teachers and parents. Thematic coding, language development assessments aligned with the Indonesian early childhood curriculum, and data triangulation were applied for analysis. The findings reveal that integrating Motivation–Action–Reward within TPR sustains children's enthusiasm, enhances participation, and supports early language development, particularly in mastering basic vocabulary such as prepositions of place. Children responded positively to physical instructions, enjoyed online Zoom activities, and experienced intrinsic satisfaction from simple verbal rewards. The study's novelty lies in systematically integrating TPR with a motivational framework for young learners in eastern Indonesia, a context rarely explored in international scholarship. The research contributes to education, linguistics, and language studies by expanding adaptive movement-based pedagogies for distance learning, enriching second language acquisition research for early EFL learners, and providing practical recommendations for teachers and policymakers.

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Keywords: *Early Language Acquisition, English As A Foreign Language, Motivation–Action–Reward, Pandemic Pedagogy, Total Physical Response*

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INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic brought profound impacts on all aspects of life, including education. When schools were closed and learning shifted online, early childhood learners became the most vulnerable group to losing meaningful learning opportunities. In language learning, especially English as a foreign language, the transition to online learning posed serious challenges. Young children primarily learn through movement, concrete experiences, and direct interaction; however, the pandemic disrupted this natural learning pattern. Consequently, many children experienced a decline in motivation, weakened engagement, and even stagnation in vocabulary development. This phenomenon is not merely an assumption but a confirmed fact reflected in various field reports and empirical studies indicating that online learning during the pandemic often led to learning loss, particularly among preschool-aged children (Ford et al., 2021; Khan & Ahmed, 2021; Uğraş et al., 2023).

The fact that young children require a distinct learning approach cannot be ignored. They cannot be treated as "miniature adults" capable of sitting still in front of a computer screen for extended periods. Rather, their developmental needs demand pedagogical strategies that integrate movement, interaction, and multisensory experiences (Bartholo et al., 2023; Indah Cahayani Damanik et al., 2023; Kurupınar & Kanmaz, 2023). At this point, the Total Physical Response (TPR) method becomes relevant. Introduced by James Asher in the late 1960s, TPR relies on verbal commands that are responded to through physical actions. For children, this method aligns well with their kinesthetic and concrete learning tendencies. The question, however, is how a method that is fundamentally based on physical interaction can be adapted for online learning. This question is critical, as a successful adaptation would mean that TPR is not limited to traditional face-to-face classrooms but can also evolve into a pedagogical instrument relevant to the digital era and educational crisis contexts.

Previous research has highlighted the effectiveness of TPR in language learning. Sultana et al. (2019) and Xie (2021) showed that TPR reduces second-language learning anxiety because cognitive load is replaced by motor activities. Norris et al. (2020) and Tan et al. (2022) emphasized that children acquire vocabulary faster through meaningful physical actions. In the Indonesian context, Saputra et al. (2020) and Tambunan et al. (2022) demonstrated that TPR enhances student participation in early childhood English classes. More recently, Carillo et al. (2023) found that TPR significantly improves preschoolers' vocabulary comprehension, even though it was still implemented in face-to-face activities.

Additionally, several studies have underscored the importance of motivation and rewards in children's learning. Huang et al. (2022) and MacIntyre et al. (2020) emphasized that motivation is the key determinant of second-language acquisition, while Corniani and Saal (2020), Song and Song (2023), and Wang et al. (2021), through Self-Determination Theory, demonstrated how intrinsic rewards sustain long-term learning engagement. In Indonesia, Hidayat et al. (2023) and Krishnamurthy et al. (2022) noted that simple rewards in online learning help children remain connected to the learning process despite screen limitations. This is reinforced by Mutiah et al. (2020) and Zein (2019), who found that early childhood learners are more responsive when teachers combine verbal rewards with physical activities. However, although the literature acknowledges the importance of motivation and rewards, the integration of both within a TPR framework, particularly during the pandemic, has rarely been explicitly explored.

From an online learning perspective, international studies have also revealed similar challenges. M. Chen et al. (2021) and Y. Zhang et al. (2019) in China reported that parents faced significant difficulties in accompanying their children during online learning, especially for subjects requiring active interaction. Research by Dewaele (2019) and Shadiev & Yang (2020) in the UK noted that children tend to lose concentration more quickly during online foreign language learning. Meanwhile, Dewaele et al. (2019) and Jin & Zhang (2021) suggested that action-based teaching strategies such as TPR have potential to bridge the limitations of online learning, though few studies have systematically examined their implementation during global crises. In Indonesia, reports from Apituley et al. (2022) and Sarah (2022) stressed

that learning loss during the pandemic was most severe at early childhood and early primary school levels, particularly in language acquisition.

Existing literature has extensively discussed the benefits of TPR, motivation, and rewards in early childhood language learning. However, most of these studies were conducted in normal face-to-face contexts. Few have attempted to transfer this approach into online settings, especially for young children in island regions facing connectivity challenges. This gap underscores the importance of the present study: exploring how TPR, with its inherently kinesthetic nature, can be implemented in remote learning contexts, and how the integration of motivation–action–reward can shape a new pattern in early language development.

Furthermore, the study's context, conducted in Maluku, eastern Indonesia, offers unique significance. Most research on language learning and TPR has been concentrated in large cities or areas with more developed educational facilities. Island regions, however, exhibit different dynamics in terms of technological access, teacher resources, and cultural background. The fact that children in such areas can still actively engage through online TPR-based learning provides an important contribution to the international literature, which often overlooks non-metropolitan geographical and cultural contexts.

Taken together, there remains a research gap in examining the implementation of TPR integrated with the motivation–action–reward framework for early childhood learners during the pandemic. While some studies have addressed TPR effectiveness and others have explored the role of motivation and rewards, few have synthesized these three elements into a comprehensive conceptual framework. Moreover, limited attention to eastern Indonesian contexts has led to underrepresentation of local experiences in global discourse. Therefore, this study offers an important contribution by examining the actual implementation of TPR in an online kindergarten setting in Ambon, while analyzing how motivation, action, and reward interact to foster early language development in young learners.

The objectives of this study are to (1) describe in depth the implementation of TPR in early childhood English learning during the pandemic, (2) analyze how motivation, physical action, and rewards interact to enhance engagement and language development, and (3) identify pedagogical practices that can serve as references for teachers and policymakers in formulating early childhood learning strategies during and after educational emergencies. Thus, this study contributes not only to the theoretical and practical development of language learning but also provides new insights into how a simple method can be adapted into a relevant, contextual, and meaningful approach for addressing global educational challenges.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method using a mini classroom ethnography approach. The use of qualitative methodology was based on the study's objective, not merely to measure children's learning outcomes quantitatively but to understand their learning experiences deeply, including motivation, physical responses, and emotional engagement in English learning. As emphasized by Maher & Dertadian (2018),

qualitative research allows researchers to capture the meaning behind social behavior in its natural context, making it highly relevant for investigating pedagogical practices in dynamic early childhood classrooms. Therefore, this study sought to uncover how the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, combined with the Motivation–Action–Reward framework, was implemented in practice rather than in theory.

The study was conducted at TK Kristen Caritas Ambon, Maluku. The site was purposefully chosen as it represents early childhood education practices in eastern Indonesia, which faced both online infrastructure challenges and limited teacher resources during the pandemic. However, the school is also known for its creative pedagogical initiatives in adapting to online learning. These conditions made TK Kristen Caritas an ideal setting for exploring how TPR could be implemented under constrained conditions while maintaining the quality of children's learning experiences.

The participants consisted of 15 kindergarten students (KG-2) aged 5–6 years. This age group was selected based on their cognitive and linguistic developmental stage, according to Piaget (1976), children in the preoperational stage learn most effectively through movement, symbols, and concrete experiences. Additionally, the study involved the classroom teacher as the primary facilitator and parents who accompanied their children during online sessions. The teacher served as a key informant due to her direct involvement in designing and conducting TPR-based lessons, while parents provided additional perspectives on children's responses at home and their roles in supporting online engagement. Thus, key informants included 15 children, one teacher, and five parents, all selected for their active participation in learning activities.

Data were collected through several complementary techniques. First, controlled participatory observation was conducted during online learning sessions via Zoom. During these observations, the researcher recorded details of children's expressions, engagement levels, and physical and verbal responses to the teacher's instructions. As Nassaji (2020) asserted, participatory observation is one of the most effective ways to understand social behavior in natural contexts, hence its suitability for capturing classroom dynamics holistically. Second, documentation, including photos, video recordings, anecdotal notes, and children's work, was collected to provide visual and narrative evidence for further analysis. Such documentation strengthened observational findings and allowed for iterative reflection. Third, informal semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher and parents, offering flexibility to follow informants' experiences and uncover their perspectives regarding children's motivation, technical challenges, and the impact of TPR on language development.

Data analysis was carried out through thematic coding to identify emerging patterns in children's motivation, participation, and language responses. This coding followed Khoa et al. (2023), who emphasized the importance of inductively developing themes from data. To assess language development, the study used Indonesia's standard early childhood development indicators, a 1–4 scale (BB, MB, BSH, BSB), to evaluate vocabulary mastery, comprehension of instructions, and progress in language use.

To ensure data validity, triangulation was applied through three strategies. First, source triangulation, by comparing data from children, teachers, and parents. Second, method triangulation, by integrating findings from observations, documentation, and interviews to test consistency. Third, time triangulation, by observing children's behaviors across multiple sessions to avoid bias from temporary responses. As Sarfo et al. (2021) emphasized, triangulation in qualitative research is not merely a technical procedure but a means to enrich understanding of complex phenomena.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dynamics of Children's Motivation in Online Language Learning

The dynamics of children's motivation in online language learning during the pandemic present an interesting picture, especially when the Total Physical Response (TPR) method is adopted as the main instructional approach. Observations showed that children displayed high enthusiasm when the teacher used songs, rhymes, and the introduction of simple vocabulary through movement-based instructions. This enthusiasm even lasted longer compared to the use of conventional instructional methods, which tended to limit children's participation and quickly caused them to lose focus. This phenomenon indicates that children's learning motivation is not merely a matter of initial stimulus but rather how learning activities can awaken emotional engagement and create an enjoyable learning atmosphere.

Field observations conducted during online classes via Zoom revealed a distinctive situation. At the beginning of the session, the teacher greeted the class with a short song accompanied by hand gestures, such as waving left and right while introducing directional or positional vocabulary. The children immediately responded enthusiastically: they repeated the gestures, imitated the words, and some even stood up from their chairs to freely follow the instructions. This contrasted sharply with moments when the teacher used conventional verbal instruction, such as asking children to name vocabulary items without movement. In such cases, the children tended to remain silent, look down, or respond minimally. This shows that the element of physical movement provides additional energy that strengthens their intrinsic motivation.

In addition to observation, informal interviews with several parents reinforced these findings. One mother, referred to as Mrs. L, mentioned that her child always looked forward to the opening song session because, according to her, "that's the most fun part and it makes her want to keep joining." Similarly, another parent, Mr. R, said that his child often repeated the songs from the online class even outside of the sessions as a form of personal enjoyment. This information indicates that motivation does not end when the learning session concludes but continues as a positive experience internalized by the child outside the classroom. In other words, the motivation generated is not merely situational but sustains the child's emotional connection to the language being learned.

Upon deeper analysis, this phenomenon aligns with the perspectives of J. J. Chen and Krieger (2023) and Stites et al. (2021), who emphasize that children's learning motivation is

strongly related to emotional engagement, especially in online contexts that are prone to decreased attention. TPR-based activities integrate cognitive, affective, and kinesthetic dimensions, allowing children to feel "alive" within the learning process. They do not merely listen or observe but also move and experience learning through their bodies. Thus, intrinsic motivation emerges not simply because of external rewards but because children find genuine enjoyment in the learning activity itself. The theories of Egan et al. (2021) and Engzell et al. (2021) support this view, arguing that when individuals feel autonomous, competent, and socially connected, intrinsic motivation is more likely to be sustained.

Furthermore, the dynamics of motivation showed a consistent pattern across almost all learning sessions. Teachers who consistently integrated songs, rhymes, and physical movements were able to maintain children's attention for 30–40 minutes during online learning. Anecdotal notes showed, for instance, that in the fifth session, children were still actively responding to instructions such as "put the book under the table" or "raise your hand up" with full energy, even after more than half an hour had passed. This fact underscores that motivation built through TPR is sustainable rather than merely an initial euphoria. A teacher interviewed for this study, referred to as Mrs. M, stated that "the children rarely get fussy when we give instructions with movement; in fact, they often ask to repeat the activity." This illustrates how children's motivation grows alongside activities perceived as enjoyable and meaningful. To clarify the dynamics of children's motivation in online contexts, the following table presents comparative observation data:

Table 1 Comparison of Children's Responses between TPR and Conventional Instructional Methods

Aspect of Children's Response	With TPR (Songs, Movement, Rhymes)	With Conventional Instruction
Initial enthusiasm	High, immediately active in following instructions	Low, some passive, need prompting
Duration of focus	Sustained for 30–40 minutes	Decreases after 10–15 minutes
Participation	Even, almost all children engaged	Uneven, only a few children respond
Intrinsic motivation	Evident (children repeat outside class)	Rarely observed
Emotional response	Cheerful, smiling, enthusiastic expressions	Flat, often quiet or looking down

Source: Research data analysis, 2023

This table demonstrates that the TPR method, through the integration of movement and motivation, generates a more positive and consistent pattern of responses compared to conventional approaches. These data are not merely statistical but reflect observable realities corroborated by parents' and teachers' experiences.

The conceptualization of these findings affirms that motivation in TPR is not simply an initial stimulus but a continuous source of energy that sustains children's engagement with

language learning. Motivation arising from kinesthetic and enjoyable activities transforms into a form of long-term engagement, which subsequently supports early vocabulary acquisition. In other words, TPR creates a bridge between enjoyable learning activities and more meaningful academic outcomes. Within the framework of contemporary learning motivation theory, such motivation can be viewed as psychological capital that enables children to persist in the challenging conditions of online learning (Sultana et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2022).

The Role of Physical Action in Facilitating Engagement and Comprehension

The use of verbal instructions followed by physical actions in early childhood language learning during the pandemic yielded significant results in enhancing children's engagement and comprehension. When teachers gave simple instructions such as "stand next to the table" or "raise your hand up," children not only responded motorically but also appeared more focused on the lesson, even when conducted via online platforms like Zoom. This phenomenon illustrates that physical engagement can overcome the limitations of screen-based interaction that often lead to boredom. Through physical activity, children find a bridge connecting the digital world with their real-life experiences in their own homes.

Field observations revealed a distinctive atmosphere in online classrooms. In one session, when the teacher gave the instruction "clap your hands three times," nearly all children clapped enthusiastically. Some even added cheerful facial expressions as if they were playing rather than simply learning a language. During the next instruction, "touch your nose" or "jump two times", children moved eagerly despite differing physical spaces: some were in living rooms, others in bedrooms with limited space. Yet these constraints did not diminish their participation. Anecdotal notes indicated that children could sustain attention longer when activities involved physical movement compared to when the teacher relied solely on verbal instruction without body demonstration.

Informal interviews with parents further supported these observations. One parent, referred to as Mrs. N, explained that her child was always more enthusiastic during online classes involving movement-based instructions. She added that her child often asked to repeat enjoyable actions, such as jumping or pointing at nearby objects. Another parent, Mr. A, noted that physical actions made it easier for his child to understand new vocabulary because words were directly associated with bodily experiences. According to him, when the teacher said "sit on the chair" and the child performed the action, the meaning of the word became clearer and easier to grasp. These parental statements reinforce that movement is not merely an activity variation but an integral component of cognitive and linguistic development.

These findings align with the theory of embodied cognition, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of body, mind, and environment in shaping understanding (Engzell et al., 2021; Muhdi et al., 2020). From this perspective, language is not learned solely through verbal symbols but also through bodily experiences that internalize word meanings. Thus, motor activities such as standing, jumping, or pointing not only strengthen long-term memory but also facilitate richer meaning construction. This is supported by Phillips (2023) and Ramdini

and Yaswinda (2021), who highlight that language comprehension is closely related to sensorimotor simulation, making it easier for children to remember words when linked to bodily experiences. In the context of online learning, this embodied learning becomes even more critical as children face potential distractions from screens. Physical action thus serves as a medium that sustains engagement while fostering deeper understanding.

Field data also showed that children did not merely perform movements mechanically but associated them with linguistic concepts. For instance, when teachers introduced prepositions of place such as “under,” “on,” and “next to,” children immediately responded by placing a book under the table, on the chair, or standing beside the table. These activities not only involved the body but also helped children build concrete spatial representations. A teacher interviewed for the study, referred to as Mrs. R, noted that mastery of prepositional vocabulary was achieved more quickly through movement practice than through illustrations or slides alone. According to her, physical action allows children to feel the meaning of words rather than just hear or see them.

To illustrate the impact of physical action in online language learning, the following table presents comparative observational data:

Table 2 Comparison of Children’s Engagement with and without Physical Action in Online Learning

Aspect of Children’s Engagement	With Physical Action (TPR)	Without Physical Action (Verbal Instruction)
Focus on instruction	High, children respond quickly	Low, children often distracted by screen
Duration of attention	Sustained for 30–35 minutes	Decreases after 10–15 minutes
Vocabulary comprehension	Faster and more consistent	Slower and easily forgotten
Emotional response	Cheerful, expressive	Flat, tends to be passive
Group participation	Almost all children involved	Only a small portion active

Source: Research data analysis, 2023

The table demonstrates that physical action has a tangible effect in improving focus, extending attention span, accelerating vocabulary comprehension, and maintaining a positive emotional atmosphere. These findings are consistent with previous literature emphasizing that motor activity helps consolidate long-term memory in early childhood (Eichstaedt et al., 2021; Rogaleva et al., 2019). Moreover, Gaalen et al. (2021) and Murayama et al. (2019) highlight that embodied learning significantly contributes to children’s cognitive development, particularly in distance learning situations filled with limitations.

Conceptually, physical action in the TPR method should no longer be viewed merely as a kinesthetic technique but as an embodied learning strategy that strengthens the connection between language, body, and learning context. This expands our understanding of the body’s role in early childhood language acquisition. Physical action offers a richer learning experience because words are not isolated entities but are always connected to

actions and contexts. In this way, children do not simply "memorize" vocabulary but internalize meanings through direct experience. In online learning, physical action also serves as a buffer against screen fatigue, providing a tangible dimension that keeps children active, engaged, and enthusiastic.

Reward as an Affective and Social Mechanism

Reward in early childhood language learning is often understood simply as a form of appreciation given by teachers to keep children motivated to learn. However, in practice, reward serves a much deeper function, not merely as an external incentive, but as an affective and social mechanism that shapes the emotional dynamics among children, teachers, and the learning process itself. The findings of this study reveal that children responded positively to simple verbal rewards such as "great!" or "excellent!" uttered by teachers each time they successfully responded to instructions in Total Physical Response (TPR) activities. This positive response not only created momentary satisfaction but also encouraged the repetition of desirable learning behaviors. In online learning situations characterized by limited interaction, such simple rewards even became important substitutes for the physical touch or nonverbal expressions usually present in face-to-face classrooms.

Field observations showed that each time the teacher expressed spontaneous praise after a child successfully followed a movement instruction, the child's face lit up. Some children smiled widely while repeating the instructed movements, as if seeking to receive the teacher's positive response once again. In one observed online learning session, the teacher instructed, "stand next to the table," and one child, referred to as M, immediately moved beside the table. When the teacher said, "Great, very good!" M enthusiastically repeated the movement without being asked. Anecdotal notes indicate that this was not an isolated response but a recurring pattern. The children seemed to find intrinsic joy in simple acknowledgment, which in turn fostered their confidence and willingness to participate more actively in subsequent activities.

Statements from interviewed parents also reinforced this finding. One parent, Mrs. S, mentioned that her child often repeated the word "great" at home whenever she accomplished something, even outside the context of language learning. This indicates that the simple verbal rewards given by the teacher were internalized by the child as symbols of personal achievement. Another teacher, Mrs. R, explained that verbal praise made children feel appreciated and recognized, especially since, in online learning, teachers could not always approach children physically. According to her, simple words filled with positive energy became a way to "fill the gap" of emotional closeness lost through screen-mediated interaction. Her statement illustrates how reward functions not merely as a technical strategy but as an emotional bridge between teacher and learner.

Theoretical analysis supports these field observations. According to the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), human motivation is grounded in three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Simple verbal rewards can strengthen two of these, competence and relatedness. Children feel capable when they receive verbal acknowledgment for appropriate behavior and simultaneously feel emotionally connected to

the teacher providing such acknowledgment. Verbal rewards thus transcend their role as external reinforcements and transform into internal factors that nurture autonomous motivation. This explains why simple verbal rewards are more effective than material incentives, which tend to generate only short-term motivation.

Furthermore, reward plays a vital role in building children's confidence in using a foreign language. Observations show that after receiving praise, children became more willing to attempt pronouncing new words, even if their pronunciation was imperfect. For instance, after the teacher instructed "say hello to your friend" and a child tried to say "hello," the teacher's "good job" encouraged other children to imitate the phrase without fear of making mistakes. Such confidence represents a crucial asset in language learning, as young learners are easily discouraged when they experience failure or lack recognition. Verbal reward thus serves as an "affective cushion," protecting children from feelings of failure while providing a safe space to experiment with new language expressions.

From a social perspective, reward also fosters a sense of shared participation within the online classroom. Even though the children were learning from their respective homes, they could still hear the teacher's praise directed toward their peers. This generated a domino effect: other children became motivated to perform the movement or try the vocabulary in hopes of receiving similar acknowledgment. One parent, Mr. F, mentioned that his child often talked about which classmates were praised by the teacher during a session and used this as motivation to perform better in the next meeting. This phenomenon shows that reward is not merely personal but also social, creating both healthy competition and solidarity within the learning group.

Field findings further revealed that simple rewards helped reduce screen fatigue commonly experienced by children during online learning. Verbal praise delivered with cheerful intonation enlivened the atmosphere of virtual classes. Teachers who consistently provided timely rewards were able to maintain high classroom energy even after 20–30 minutes of activity. Observational notes recorded that children remained active until the end of sessions when rewards were given consistently, whereas in sessions with minimal praise, participation tended to decline midway through. These findings are consistent with Riener and Wagner (2022), who emphasize that affective dimensions in online learning play a crucial role in sustaining students' attention and motivation.

From a conceptual standpoint, reward in TPR serves not merely as an external incentive but as an affective instrument that strengthens the emotional bond between children, teachers, and the learning process. Reward connects the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions into a unified learning experience: the child understands the instruction, feels joy through recognition, and becomes motivated to connect with both teacher and peers. In other words, reward becomes an emotional language that supports academic language. Here, it is evident that simple rewards transcend their technical motivational function and evolve into mechanisms for shaping children's learning identity. Children learn not merely to please the teacher but to build confidence and a sense of belonging within their learning community.

Early Language Development in the Context of Pandemic Pedagogy

Early childhood language development during the pandemic became a central concern in educational practice due to the limitations of remote learning, particularly the lack of direct interaction between teachers and students. However, research on the use of Total Physical Response (TPR) demonstrates that even in online learning settings, strategies that combine verbal instruction with physical movement can still improve mastery of basic vocabulary. Children who initially struggled to understand simple words, especially prepositions of place such as “in,” “on,” or “under”, showed significant improvement when these words were associated with physical movements and tangible objects around them. This progress was evident in assessment results based on early childhood curriculum indicators (BSB, BSH, MB, BB), showing a positive shift from the “Not Yet Developed” to the “Developing as Expected” category.

In one observed session, the teacher instructed the child to “stand next to the chair,” and the child quickly responded by standing beside the chair at home. This response demonstrated not only literal understanding but also the reinforcement of memory through bodily association with the phrase “next to.” Observation notes revealed that children who appeared confused in the first session gradually showed enthusiasm and often repeated the given commands with cheerful tones. This finding aligns with Grossmann et al. (2023) and H. Zhang and Huang (2023), who emphasize that action-based language learning can overcome attention difficulties typically present in online learning environments prone to distraction.

An interview with one teacher, referred to as L., affirmed that children more easily remembered vocabulary practiced through physical movement than through listening alone. L. noted that despite limited media resources, children remained able to learn effectively because they directly connected words with their motor experiences. This observation supports embodied cognition theory, which argues that bodily experience is not merely a supportive factor but an integral part of cognitive processing. In the context of the pandemic, the body became the primary channel through which meaning was transferred from language to the child’s awareness, allowing words to transcend abstraction and become part of their lived experience.

From field observations, the atmosphere of online learning displayed distinct dynamics. Children initially appeared passive in front of the screen but became more active as teachers guided them through movements. When instructions were given, some children searched for nearby objects, chairs, tables, or even toys, to use as practice tools. This activity not only enhanced focus but also created a contextual learning environment. Amid the spatial restrictions and social isolation caused by the pandemic, these sessions provided children with refreshing interactive spaces where the home environment functioned simultaneously as a language classroom.

Analysis of vocabulary development data revealed consistent patterns. Children who regularly participated in TPR-based activities progressed more quickly from the MB (Beginning to Develop) to BSH (Developing as Expected) categories. This improvement is shown in the following table summarizing vocabulary development across online learning cycles:

Table 3 Development of Vocabulary (Prepositions of Place) among Early Childhood Learners in Online Learning

Vocabulary Indicator (Prepositions of Place)	Cycle I	Cycle II	Cycle III
BSB (Well Developed)	10%	20%	35%
BSH (Developing as Expected)	25%	40%	45%
MB (Beginning to Develop)	40%	30%	15%
BB (Not Yet Developed)	25%	10%	5%

Source: Research data analysis, 2023

The table shows that the proportion of children categorized as "Not Yet Developed" dropped sharply from 25% to only 5% after three learning cycles. At the same time, the "Well Developed" category increased significantly from 10% to 35%. These results demonstrate not only the effectiveness of embodied strategies but also the potential of pandemic pedagogy with innovative approaches to mitigate the learning loss widely feared by educators.

In addition to method-related factors, children's motivation also played a crucial role in strengthening early language development. In several sessions, teachers used simple praises such as "great!" as forms of reward. Though seemingly simple, these positive expressions reinforced children's enthusiasm to keep trying. This experience aligns with self-determination theory, which emphasizes that social recognition and non-material appreciation can enhance children's autonomous motivation. Therefore, the given rewards were not merely short-term incentives but part of an affective process that cultivated children's confidence in using a second language.

Conceptually, early language development during the pandemic must be understood as the result of the simultaneous interaction among motivation, physical action, and reward. These three components form a mutually reinforcing learning system: physical action provides concrete meaning to vocabulary, reward delivers affective acknowledgment that nurtures enthusiasm, and motivation sustains the learning process. This pattern creates a learning ecosystem that is not only cognitively effective but also emotionally nurturing, particularly for children experiencing social isolation during the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of Total Physical Response (TPR) within the Motivation–Action–Reward framework in early childhood English learning during the pandemic successfully addressed the pedagogical challenges caused by the abrupt shift to online systems. The integration of these three aspects not only maintained children's motivation and engagement but also strengthened basic vocabulary acquisition through embodied experiences that interconnected language, body, and emotion. Children responded to physical instructions enthusiastically, derived intrinsic satisfaction from simple forms of reward, and ultimately developed their foundational language competence more sustainably. These findings affirm that TPR strategies enriched with motivational dimensions can serve as adaptive approaches for pandemic pedagogy, while also offering theoretical

contributions to early childhood second-language acquisition studies and providing practical insights for teachers and policymakers to design action-based pedagogies that are more humanistic and contextually responsive.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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