

THE ROLE OF PLAY BASED LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD ENGLISH EDUCATION

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Abstract:

Play-based learning (PBL) is more and more an invaluable method of early language learning, particularly for kids in the first-time school-attending age group learning English as an additional language. This study investigates the effectiveness of PBL in developing the English language skills of kids in the age group 6-8 at the initial years of primary school. Aligned with constructivist theory, this quasi-experimental 4-week experiment involved 30 students.

The results showed that children in the play-based learning group showed significantly greater vocabulary, speaking, and listening gains, in addition to greater active participation when in lessons, as opposed to the control group. This study confirms the significance of the incorporation of games, stories, and involvement in English lessons in enhancing language and social skills development.

Keywords: Play-based learning, early childhood education, English language acquisition, young learners, primary school, language development, vocabulary development, language skills, learner engagement, interactive learning, second language teaching.

Introduction

Children between the ages of 6 and 8 are at an important stage of cognitive, social and language development. This period is characterized by increased attention, expansion of vocabulary and the formation of basic literacy skills. For children learning a foreign language such as English, lessons at this age are most effective

if they are fun, meaningful, and organized in a way that matches their developmental level. Traditional educational methods are often based on memorization and passive reception, which can reduce children's motivation and negatively affect long-term retention of knowledge. In contrast, play-based learning (PBL) supports active participation, learning in context, and social interaction which is in line with young children's natural learning styles. Research shows that play plays an important role in language development, especially when teaching methods are tailored to a child's developmental stage and interests. Study aims to investigate the effects of game-based learning on English language learning among 6- to 8-year-old primary school students. The study compared the learning outcomes of students who received game-based lessons and those who participated in traditional, teacher-led English classes over a 4-week period.

This study draws on constructivist learning theories, particularly those of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Piaget emphasized that children acquire knowledge through practical experience and active research. Vygotsky highlighted the importance of social communication and games in the development of complex thinking and language skills. According to both theorists, learning is most effective when children are actively involved and supported in a social context by adults or peers in a social context.

These ideas form the basis for game-based learning (PBL) which integrates language learning into activities that are imaginative, inquiry-based and meaningful for children. In language learning, play provides opportunities for real-time communication, contextual repetition, and emotional engagement, all of which contribute to deeper understanding and long-term memory retention.

Recent studies confirm the benefits of game-based learning in language learning. A study conducted by Harris (2023) found that young learners who participated in game-based English lessons achieved better results in vocabulary recall and oral expression than those who were taught using traditional methods. Another study by Yang and Charubusp (2023) found that structured play activities increased Chinese EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge and classroom engagement.

In addition, Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) explored teachers' views on play-based learning (PBL) and found results that strongly support its effectiveness in supporting language and cognitive development. However, some teachers cited lack of training or institutional support as an obstacle to implementing this

method. These findings underscore the need to equip teachers with the necessary strategies and resources to facilitate high-quality, play-based learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a quasi-experimental design to investigate the effects of play-based learning (PBL) on the English language learning of 6- to 8-year-old primary school students. The study was conducted in two identical classes of a public elementary school over a 4-week period. The two classes were randomly assigned to an experimental group or a control group. The study used a mixed-methods approach, which combined quantitative assessments and qualitative observations to measure the outcomes of play-based learning on language development.

Thirty primary school students aged 6 to 8 took part in the research. These participants were randomly selected from two similar public elementary school classes. They were randomly divided into two groups:

1. **Experimental group (15 children):** This group learned English through game-based activities. Activities included role plays, storytelling with picture books, action songs, word games (such as “Simon says” with verbs), and phonetic puzzles. These methods were designed to encourage active participation, stimulate interest, and support language learning through context-rich, hands-on experiences.
2. **Control group (15 children):** The control group received traditional English lessons, which were based on lectures, vocabulary lists, copying from the board, and grammar worksheets. These methods were teacher-centered and included passive learning strategies in which students mainly engaged in memorization and repetitive exercises.

Instruments and Procedures. Various instruments and procedures were used to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching methods:

1. **Language assessment:** Standardized pre- and post-tests were used to assess students’ English language skills before and after the 4-week training period. These tests measured children’s vocabulary, listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing skills. A preliminary test was conducted at the beginning of the study, and a final test was conducted at the end of the 4-week period, and changes in language development were determined.
2. **Observational Checklist:** A checklist adapted from the model proposed by Yang and Charubusp (2023) was used to monitor and record student activity during the

teaching period. This list included behavioral measures such as verbal participation, interest in assignments, cooperation with peers, and general classroom interactions. The goal was to determine the extent to which students actively participated in educational activities and to what extent they were involved in the educational process.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected over a 4-week period. In the first week, both groups took a preliminary language test and their initial language skills were assessed. For the next four weeks, the experimental group participated in game-based language activities, while the control group was taught according to the traditional curriculum. At the end of 4 weeks, both groups took a final test and their progress was evaluated. During this period, researchers and teachers conducted regular observations and recorded the activity of students in the lesson based on the observation list. Also, at the end of the research, informal interviews were held with teachers, and opinions were obtained about the effectiveness of teaching methods and the difficulties faced in applying PBL in practice.

Quantitative data from the initial and final tests were analyzed using statistical methods to determine whether there was a significant difference in language development between the experimental and control groups. Descriptive statistics such as average values and standard deviation were used to summarize the data. Inductive statistical methods such as paired t-test were used to compare the results of the initial and final test for each group, as well as to evaluate the effect of teaching methods on students' language skills.

Qualitative data obtained through observation lists and teachers' diaries were analyzed using thematic analysis method. This analysis helped to identify certain trends in students' participation and behavior in class. Qualitative data provided additional context to the quantitative results and were instrumental in explaining how and why the play-based teaching approach supported language development.

RESULT

Data collected through pre- and post-tests revealed that game-based learned based on teaching (PBL). children in the experimental group made significant gains in the five main areas of English vocabulary, listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing skills.

The greatest increase in vocabulary and speaking skills was in the students in the PBL group observed. Words based on the picture on the naming test, experimental group students averaged 85 on the post-test scored, while the control group scored 70-a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.01$). Similarly, the PBL group had a mean score of 82 on the Verbal Note Conversation Test, while the control group had a mean score of 65 ($p < 0.01$). These results are learning through play, especially word games and role plays real-time conversation through shows that it encourages and enables the active use of vocabulary.

Also, PBL on listening comprehension in the group, much younger results were observed. Story-Based Comprehension on the test, the PBL group scored an average of 80 points, while the control group scored 68 points ($p < 0.05$). Storytelling, singing, and interactive listening games improve children's listening comprehension service to development in context may have done.

Reading and writing skills increased in both groups, but the increase was greater in the experimental group. On the word recognition test, the mean score of the PBL group was 78, compared to 66 for the control group ($p < 0.05$). Writing, that is, through the task of creating a sentence Ichananda, PBL group scored 75 points, and the control group scored 62 points ($p < 0.05$). These results show that even through conventional methods teachable literacy skills can also be learned more effectively through play.

Qualitative observations behavior and activity of students during the lesson in both groups that there are clear differences showed. Children in a PBL group always high level of enthusiasm, oral participation and attendance showed attention. Spontaneous use of English by teachers, active in games participation and collaboration with peers are frequent was recorded.

On the contrary, children in the control group showed more passive behavior, less verbal expression and sometimes showed indifference to the lesson, especially in grammar exercises and blackboard assignments. Although, some readers are traditional, the method also showed growth, overall energy and motivation were much lower in this group.

Summary Table of Results

Language Skill	Assessment Tool	Experimental Group (Post-Test)
Vocabulary	Picture naming test	85
Listening	Story comprehension test	80
Speaking	Oral proficiency interview	82
Reading	Word recognition test	78
Writing	Sentence construction task	75

Language Skill	Assessment Tool	Control Group (Post-Test)
Vocabulary	Picture naming test	70
Listening	Story comprehension test	68
Speaking	Oral proficiency interview	65
Reading	Word recognition test	66
Writing	Sentence construction task	62

Experimental Group (Post-Test)	Control Group (Post-Test)	p-value
85	70	< 0.01
80	68	< 0.05
82	65	< 0.01
78	66	< 0.05
75	62	< 0.05

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that play-based learning significantly enhances English language development in school children aged 6–8. The greatest gains were seen

in oral language (speaking and listening) and vocabulary, likely due to the interactive nature of the activities. Children engaged in PBL also showed more consistent enthusiasm and classroom participation, aligning with findings from previous studies (Harris, 2023; Yang & Charubusp, 2023).

Educational Implications

Teachers of young English learners should consider adopting play-based methods to increase effectiveness and engagement. Activities like storytelling, role-play, and language games are not only fun but also academically meaningful. Schools should provide professional development on designing and managing play-based instruction for language classrooms.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study was limited to a small sample over a short time (4 weeks). Longer studies with larger groups could provide more insight into long-term effects. Future research should also examine how PBL supports children from different language backgrounds and with varying English proficiency levels.

CONCLUSION

Play-based learning (PBL) proves to be a powerful and effective instructional approach for school children aged 6 to 8 who are learning English as a second language. The findings of this study clearly indicate that when English instruction is integrated into structured, purposeful play, children not only demonstrate stronger gains in vocabulary, speaking, and listening comprehension but also show greater enthusiasm, engagement, and motivation toward learning. The play-based environment promotes active participation, creativity, social interaction, and emotional involvement, all of which are essential for meaningful language acquisition at this developmental stage. Activities such as role-playing, action songs, storytelling, and games allow children to explore language in context, making it easier to understand, use, and retain. These experiences support both linguistic development and broader cognitive and social growth.

In contrast, traditional teacher-led methods, while still effective to some extent may not fully capture the learning potential of young children. Passive instruction, rote memorization, and limited interaction tend to suppress learner curiosity and reduce intrinsic motivation, which can hinder long-term language development. Moreover, the study highlights that PBL does not compromise academic rigor. On the contrary, the structured and well-designed play activities

used in the experimental group led to significantly better academic outcomes than those achieved through conventional instruction. These findings reinforce the notion that learning through play is not merely a recreational strategy but a pedagogically sound approach supported by research and theory. Given these outcomes, educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers are encouraged to rethink early English language instruction and actively incorporate play-based strategies into classroom practices. Professional development and institutional support should also be provided to help teachers effectively implement PBL techniques. When done with intention and structure, play-based learning can transform the language learning experience into one that is both joyful and academically enriching for young learners.

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