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The impact of play-based learning in teaching English to preschoolers in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

 Subadrah Madhawa Nair^{1*},  Syeda Rabia Tahir²,  Abby Aleysca Jopius³,  Mallika Vasugi V. Govindarajoo⁴

^{1,2,3,4}*Faculty of Education and Humanities, UNITAR International University, Kelana Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.*

Corresponding author: Subadrah Madhawa Nair (Email: subadrahmadhawanair@gmail.com)

Abstract

The primary objectives of this study were to examine how preschool teachers integrate play-based learning methods in English lessons, explore teachers' perceptions of play-based learning, and identify the challenges they encounter in applying this approach in the classroom. To achieve these aims, a qualitative study design was employed. Three preschool teachers from three private preschools in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, were chosen as a sample using a purposive sampling technique. All the participants have teaching experience ranging from three to ten years, and they employ play-based learning in teaching. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analyzed to identify key patterns and outcomes. The findings reveal that teachers employed a wide repertoire of play-based strategies, including role-play, storytelling, songs and nursery rhymes, word games, and physical movement activities. These methods were found to significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition, sentence construction, confidence, improve speaking and listening skills, and overall interest in English among preschool children. However, several challenges hindered the full integration of play-based pedagogy. These included limited instructional time due to an overcrowded syllabus, insufficient physical classroom space, inadequate teaching materials, and, in some cases, parental expectations favouring more traditional, academically oriented instruction. This study offers important implications for policymakers, curriculum designers, and educators, particularly in strengthening early childhood English instruction through the systematic integration of play-based learning approaches. This study also has crucial pedagogical implications as it suggests that play-based learning creates an enjoyable learning environment and can improve children's vocabulary, oral skills, motivation, and confidence.

Keywords: Challenges, Children's engagement, Classroom practices, Play-based method, Preschool, Quality education, Teachers' perception.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, play-based learning has gained significant attention as a powerful teaching approach in early childhood education, especially for introducing English to preschool learners. This interest reflects the growing awareness of English as a global lingua franca and the importance of learning the language from a young age [1]. With globalization, new technologies, and increased migration, English proficiency is now seen as a key skill that supports children's future educational opportunities and career success.

Play-based learning in early childhood education is recognized as a child-centered approach that integrates both language acquisition and holistic child development. According to Aguilar [2] play-based learning is particularly well-suited for teaching preschool children across developmental stages, as it provides opportunities to nurture motor skills alongside cognitive and social growth. Within preschool contexts, play-based learning can be understood as a pedagogical model that not only facilitates meaningful engagement but also informs assessment practices [3]. Furthermore, play-based learning has been identified as an effective and developmentally rigorous strategy, one that aligns pedagogical goals with the innate human inclination toward play [4]. Play-based learning also contributes to the holistic development of children by promoting socio-emotional competencies, fostering creative and critical thinking, cultivating global competence, encouraging innovation, and supporting physical development [5-7].

The benefits of play in early language development are founded on developmental psychology and the theory of language acquisition. From a socio-cultural perspective, Vygotsky [8]. Zone of Proximal Development highlights the social interaction part of the developmental process. Play offers a secure, constructive, and collaborative atmosphere in which children can experiment with new words, play around with sentence forms, and receive constructive responses from fellow classmates and instructors. Crucially, this is all done in a climate where error is neither penalized nor viewed as part of the process of learning [9]. For example, during a simulated-play "restaurant" exercise, a child will say "I want apple juice" instead of "I want an apple juice," and through teacher modelling or peer modelling, the correct form can be imparted without causing stress or humiliation.

Within the Malaysian context, the role of play in preschool is made the focus of formal acknowledgement within the National Preschool Curriculum Standards (NPSC), which emphasize play as a tool for allowing children to grow linguistically and literately, including English [10]. In Malaysia's multicultural and multilingual society where Malay is the national language, and children are commonly bilingual with one of several mother tongues English often functions as a second or even a third language. Such multilingualism underscores the requirement for pedagogically attentive strategies of teaching that are interactive, inclusive, and adaptable to variations in exposure to English among pre-school children.

Despite policy support for it, poor implementation notwithstanding, research indicates uneven application of play-based learning across Malaysian preschools. Teacher perceptions, teacher education, and having sufficient resources all have major contributions to make regarding how well play is incorporated into daily practice [11, 12]. For example, some teachers may consider play an afterthought to "serious" work, leading to a more hyper-focused emphasis on workbook activity and formal instruction. Some may want to employ play-based practices but lack the material, physical, or administrative support to do it successfully. In private pre-schools, there are also parental pressures for early academic achievement, sometimes at the cost of prioritizing measurable outcomes like lists of words and test scores over more process-oriented, play-based practices [13].

In addition, Ahmad, et al. [14] pointed out that play can act as a linguistic crossing between home language and English for children who are dwelling in non-English-speaking environments. In multicultural environments such as those found in Malaysia, play offers a comfortable setting in which children can experiment with new words, test mistakes, and learn from others without the anxiety that sometimes accompanies official lessons. Play also promotes socio-emotional development by turn-taking, empathy, and resilience, all of which indirectly enable the learning of language.

In English language learning specifically, play interventions have some particular strengths. They allow children to encounter and use new words in rich, context-based settings that facilitate retention and comprehension. For instance, a puppet story can incorporate new vocabulary within an engaging anecdote, and also encourage the children to reply, pose questions, and even create their own stories [15]. Group games like 'Simon Says' or 'Scavenger Hunt' can modify language practice into an interactive, enjoyable activity, utilizing children's natural energy and curiosity.

Malaysian preschool teachers frequently have crowded timetables with inadequate provision for long periods of free or guided play. Physical space limitations might limit the types of activities that can be arranged, especially in urban settings where classrooms are small [16]. Further, in the absence of adequate professional development, teachers may struggle to balance the free nature of play with specific learning objectives, especially in language education. Overcoming these issues will require a collective effort by policymakers, school administrators, and teacher training institutions to ensure that the principles of play-based learning are not only understood but also practically enabled.

1.1. Problem Statement

In Malaysia, English language teaching has traditionally relied on teacher-centered approaches such as rote memorization, repetition, and explicit grammar instruction, even at the preschool level. While these methods may serve a purpose, particularly in reinforcing specific concepts, they often constrain children's creativity, curiosity, and intrinsic motivation to learn [17]. Moreover, such approaches tend to position children as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in the learning process. In contrast, play-based learning presents a purposeful alternative to this model. By granting children autonomy and opportunities to explore independently, play-based pedagogy not only fosters language development but also enhances problem-solving abilities, social competence, and emotional resilience [18].

Although the Malaysian National Preschool Standard Curriculum Ministry of Education Malaysia [19] explicitly emphasizes the use of play to support language acquisition a significant policy–practice gap remains. Many instructors continue to rely on traditional teacher-centered approaches such as rote memorization, drills, and worksheet-based activities, which may not align with the developmental needs and learning styles of young children Ramli, et al. [12]. Mohamad Muar, et al. [20] further highlight that some early childhood educators in Malaysia are uncertain about how to meaningfully integrate play into language instruction. This challenge is often attributed to insufficient professional training, limited instructional time, and parental pressures for rapid academic outcomes.

Yusof [13] observed that some teachers and parents remain primarily concerned with achieving immediate academic outcomes, such as ensuring children acquire reading and writing skills at a particular age, rather than prioritizing the broader developmental benefits of play. This emphasis often translates into stricter, worksheet-driven lessons that privilege memorization over meaningful engagement with the language. Such practices risk creating a disjunction between the scholastic performance expected of children and their natural learning tendencies, thereby impeding long-term language development. Consequently, this situation may result in missed opportunities for children to acquire English in a natural, meaningful, and developmentally appropriate manner.

Results of a recent study by Yee, et al. [21] have confirmed that there are very limited studies that have examined the learning outcomes of play at preschool settings. A study by Yean & Izawati Ngadni [22] indicates that there is insufficient readiness of diploma students to carry out high-quality play-based learning, which carries implications for the overall standard of early childhood education in Malaysia. Furthermore, there are limited qualitative studies that consider teachers' perceptions, classroom practice, and contextual issues of play-based English language teaching. This is significant because the success of play-based learning is dependent on teachers' conceptions and how they enact it in their day-to-day practical work [23]. Without this knowledge, play-based learning becomes a superficial concept, lacking pedagogical significance to support language development.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by critically examining the implementation of play-based learning in the teaching of English to young children at three preschools in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Employing a qualitative research design, it explores how teachers conceptualize and enact English instruction, the specific forms of play utilized, and the challenges they encounter in practice. The findings are expected to generate theoretical and empirical insights that advance scholarly understanding of play-based pedagogy in early childhood English language education, while also informing policy and curriculum development in the Malaysian context.

1.2. Research Questions

The following three research questions guide this study:

1. How is play-based learning implemented in the teaching of English to young children at the preschool level?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of using play-based learning in English language teaching?
3. What challenges do teachers encounter when implementing play-based learning in English language instruction?

2. Literature Review

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in Vygotsky [8]. Sociocultural Theory, which underscores the pivotal role of social interaction in children's learning and development. Vygotsky posited that learning occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a space where children can achieve higher levels of understanding when supported by more knowledgeable others, such as teachers or peers. In this process, scaffolding provided by adults and peers enables children to gradually internalize new concepts and skills. Within the context of preschool English teaching, play-based learning aligns closely with these principles. Activities such as singing songs, narrating stories, and engaging in role-play create interactive and socially mediated opportunities through which children actively construct meaning and develop language competence. Thus, Vygotsky's theory provides a strong foundation for examining how play-based strategies facilitate English language learning among young children.

In addition, this study is informed by Piaget [24]. Cognitive Development Theory, which emphasizes the stages of mental development and highlights how children actively construct knowledge through exploration and play. During the preoperational stage (approximately ages 2 to 7), children are particularly curious and imaginative, engaging in symbolic play that supports their cognitive growth. Piaget argued that activities such as transforming a stick into a “magic wand” reflect the development of representational thought, a foundational process for both cognitive and language development. Within the context of preschool English teaching, symbolic play provides children with meaningful opportunities to experiment with language, practice new vocabulary, and express abstract ideas in creative ways. Thus, Piaget’s framework complements Vygotsky [8]. Sociocultural Theory by further explaining how play-based learning fosters both cognitive and linguistic development in early childhood.

Vygotsky [8] and Piaget [24] together provide a strong theoretical rationale for the use of play-based methods in learning English among preschoolers. Vygotsky emphasizes the social-cultural learning process through interaction, and Piaget focuses on individual discovery and symbolic thought. Together, both theories endorse the pedagogical significance of play in early English learning, especially in the Malaysian preschool context, where young children are still developing fundamental linguistic and cognitive abilities.

When children hear English songs, rhymes, or puppetry, they are not only learning new words but also figuring out meanings, constructing sentences, and experimenting with language in safe and fun ways. This play helps to create both receptive (listening, understanding) and expressive (speaking, using) language skills.

2.1. Play-based Learning in Teaching English

English has a serious role in Malaysia’s multilingual society as the second language after Bahasa Malaysia. Due to its international importance in communication, business, science, and education, English is introduced to Malaysian children as early as the preschool level. The Malaysian Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the National Preschool Standard Curriculum [19] gives much importance to English as a core subject to foster basic communication skills, vocabulary development, and literacy at an early age. One of the hindrances in learning English in preschool is children’s mother tongue interference [25].

According to Mohamad Muar, et al. [20] most preschool teachers adopt traditional method of teaching English such as memorising vocabulary. Abdullah, et al. [26] also opined that preschool teachers are not trained to use effective methods in teaching English.

Eng [27] highlighted in her study that a majority of Malaysian preschool children find it hard to acquire English due to limited outside exposure. Unlike children exposed to English-speaking environments, Malaysian students only rely on school as their English input source. It is therefore important for teachers to create English-rich learning contexts that are salient, contextual, and meaningful to the children.

Play-based learning provides a good framework to address problems in teaching English. According to Parker and Thomsen [28] and Zosh, et al. [29] play-based learning leads to deep learning because children are joyful, actively engaging, meaningful, iterative, and socially interactive. By using English in songs, stories, playtime, and role-playing, children are provided with more exposure to the language in a pleasant and non-intimidating way. For example, a “grocery store” pretend play area encourages children to use habitual English phrases such as “How much is this?” or “I want to buy apples,” thereby engaging them in realistic language use.

In addition, Adnan and Paranjothi [30] demonstrated that role-playing activities, such as ‘market day’ or ‘family roles,’ significantly enhance children’s second language learning. Their findings indicate that drama-based activities not only facilitate language mastery but also foster critical thinking skills, aligning with the goals of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025 [10]. Furthermore, drama has been shown to cultivate collaborative competencies and increase learners’ motivation. Similarly, Lee and Liu [31] reported that drama-based play contributes positively to the development of children’s oral communication skills and collaborative abilities. Supporting this perspective, Whitebread, et al. [32] provided evidence that engagement in repetitive play scenarios supports long-term language acquisition and fluency.

2.2. Benefits of Play Play-Based Learning

Parker, et al. [33] describe that children can foster cognitive, social, emotional, creative and physical skills through active engagement in learning through play. that is experienced as joyful, meaningful, socially interactive, actively engaging. As applied to teaching English, it is a natural and highly effective means by which children can acquire new vocabulary, work on sentence forms, and learn to communicate. In contrast to the traditional methods of instruction, which are likely to emphasize rote memorization and worksheets, play-based learning offers an immersed, low-key environment in which language learning occurs naturally through experience, discovery, and imagination.

These benefits are confirmed through empirical evidence in global studies. A study by Schwartz, et al. [34] found that young children in high-quality play-based preschool programmes in early years centres achieved better performance in language and literacy. Although Malaysian studies are scarce, recent research by Hassinger-Das, et al. [35] has found that preschool children with rich language play environments exhibit greater vocabulary development and improved sentence usage compared to drill-based methods.

A study by Palandi, et al. [36] reveals that the use of *Scramword* enrich students’ English vocabulary and motivation in learning. Among the most significant advantages of learning through play is increased participation [37-39]. Children are naturally drawn to engage in enjoyable activities. If English is incorporated in play, role-

playing, songs, and stories, children will participate more actively and use the language spontaneously. According to Schwartz, et al. [34] fantasy play demonstrates more complex vocabulary usage and sentence construction compared to children in traditional classrooms.

Furthermore, findings by Astuti and Afendi [40] reveal that play enables differentiated and individualized learning. Not all children learn the same way or at the same pace. Nair, et al. [41] also stressed that games can help low achievers to progress in their learning process. Through play, teachers are able to observe and assist each child's language acquisition according to their level. For example, a new language learner can pick up by listening and copying in action songs, while a more advanced learner may take charge of a group of children for a group session of storytelling. This kind of flexibility is rarely achievable in more rigid pedagogies [42].

2.3. Teachers' Perceptions of Play-Based Learning

In Malaysia, while the majority of early childhood teachers are aware of the benefits of play in early childhood education, not all of them are confident in using play-based approaches to teach languages effectively. A study by Mohamad Muar, et al. [20] revealed that although preschool teachers in general agreed that play supports learning, there was still ambiguity regarding how to align play with curriculum objectives, especially for subjects like English.

The benefits of play-based methods have been substantiated by empirical research. For instance, Schwartz, et al. [34] found that young children enrolled in high-quality play-based preschool programmes demonstrated superior performance in language and literacy. Although studies in the Malaysian context remain limited, evidence from Hassinger-Das, et al. [35] indicates that preschool children exposed to rich language play environments exhibit greater vocabulary growth and improved sentence construction compared to their peers in drill-based programmes.

On the other hand, teachers who are well-versed in early childhood pedagogy and language teaching are more likely to integrate play-based learning in English classroom successfully. As such, Teacher Training and professional development are required to equip teachers with the competencies to plan and deliver effective play-based English lessons [43]. However, teachers faced time constraints, parental pressure, and limited resources as barriers to the implementation of play-based English instruction [44]. Such constraints make teachers prefer the use of worksheets and formal lessons over the play-based method.

2.4. Challenges Faced by Teachers when Implementing Play-Based

According to Heyi [45] many parents and teachers remain uncertain about play-based learning, as they perceive classroom teaching to be more effective when conducted through formal instruction. Concerns are often raised regarding the potential impact on learning outcomes when children engage in play as part of the instructional process. Therefore, it is essential that teachers develop the competence to select appropriate forms of play and integrate them effectively into classroom practice in order to achieve the intended learning objectives [46]. Furthermore, external pressures from parents and school administrators also present significant barriers to the implementation of play-based learning in preschool settings Hisham and Ying [47].

Gura, et al. [48] argued that primary school teachers in Ukraine are not adequately prepared to implement play-based learning and often express feelings of insecurity when conducting play-based science activities. Similarly, Amiruddin, et al. [11] emphasized that integration of play-based learning (PBL) in Malaysian early childhood science education remains challenging, primarily because many teachers lack the necessary training to implement it effectively. Consequently, they recommend that preschool teachers receive targeted training and be provided with structured modules to support the effective use of play-based learning in classroom practice.

Fung and Cheng [49] found that Chinese parents are not favourable of play-based learning because, for them, learning should be formal with full effort and willpower. Findings by Fesseha and Pyle [50], also indicate that teachers are confused and no clarity on how to implement play-based learning. Hisham and Ying [47] asserted that cultural beliefs in Malaysian society that prioritize academic success over play pose a barrier to play-based learning in preschools. Similarly, a study by San and Hui [51] indicates that most preschools in Malaysia emphasize rote learning rather than natural and creative learning.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the use of play-based learning in teaching English to young children at three private preschools in Kota Kinabalu Sabah. A qualitative research design was deemed appropriate as it provides a clearer understanding of the participants' real-life experiences and attitudes within an educational context. Qualitative research, according to Mohajan [52], allows researchers to gain rich and in-depth information on human behaviours, beliefs, and practices.

This study explores the implementation of play-based learning in a specific preschool context. A qualitative study is suitable when exploring a phenomenon in depth and in its natural setting [53]. With this design, the researcher was able to focus extensively on a single setting and gain a holistic picture of practices and challenges related to the use of play-based learning in English language learning. To collect pertinent data, the research employed semi-structured one-on-one interviews. According to Sutton and Austin [54] semi-structured interviews are of great value in qualitative research when investigating participants' perceptions, enabling them to expound on their experiences using their own words.

3.2. Sample

Three participants (English teachers) were selected from three private preschools through purposive sampling, one of the techniques often used in qualitative research to choose individuals who are especially knowledgeable or knowledgeable about the phenomenon being studied [55]. The participants have at least six months of experience in implementing play-based learning strategies.

The teacher group was kept small so that data collection and analysis could be conducted intensively, as with qualitative case study research. Braun and Clarke [56] observe that qualitative research does not require the large sample of participants but acknowledges depth of knowledge and richness of data generated from in-depth accounts. All the participants were informed of the study nature and provided their participate voluntarily. Participants' actual names were substituted with pseudonyms to prevent revealing their identities for confidentiality purposes.

3.3. Instrument

The primary research instrument used in this research was a semi-structured interview protocol, specifically designed to explore teachers' lived experiences, perceptions, issues, and incidents observed in those who practice play-based learning in the English language class. Semi-structured interviews are typical of qualitative research, as they enable the researcher to attain rich, descriptive data with enough leeway to follow up on promising or emergent issues raised by the respondents [57].

3.4. Validity and Pilot Test

To validate content, two experts on qualitative research and early childhood education checked the initial draft of the interview questions. Their feedback ensured the questions' wording, clarity, and suitability were refined to elicit the best and meaningful answers. In addition, a pilot interview was also conducted with a single teacher who met the participant criteria but was not part of the full study. The pilot test helped the researchers evaluate the order of questions and effect the necessary corrections and to ensure sufficient data were collected to answer the Research Questions.

3.5. Procedure

Each interview session was conducted independently in a calm setting on the school campus to promote comfort and frankness. The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, and all of them were conducted in English because the participants were comfortable and familiar with the language. All the interview sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed.

3.6. Data analysis

Data collected from semi-structured interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, which is among the most ubiquitous qualitative research methods for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes in data. The study employed thematic analysis because it is flexible and can provide a detailed and rich description of the data, particularly in revealing participants' experiences and perceptions [56].

4. Findings

4.1. How is Play-Based Learning Implemented in the Teaching of English to Young Children at the Preschool Level?

Three major themes were derived from the analysis of interview transcripts regarding the approaches and strategies used by teachers in integrating play in their English classes. These themes detail an extremely interactive and dynamic approach to early language learning in a play-based environment. The findings show that play-based learning is implemented in preschools through music, songs, and movement; role play and dramatic play; and the use of concrete materials and visual resources.

Theme 1: Songs and Movements

Teachers A, B, and C in this study emphasized that music, song, and movement formed an integral part of their English language instruction. These activities were not employed merely as entertainment but were deliberately used to introduce, reinforce, and consolidate new vocabulary. The strategies most frequently implemented included action songs, nursery rhymes, chants, and short rhythm games. According to the teachers, these activities were highly effective as they engaged multiple senses and encouraged participation even from the most hesitant children.

"I use songs in almost all my lessons. For example, if we are working on colours, we sing the 'Colour Song.' It helps the children remember the words in a relaxed way. Even the shy ones find themselves singing along." (Teacher A)

"We sing and do the gestures. So, for 'If You're Happy and You Know It', I fill in English verbs like 'clap', 'jump', and 'turn around'. They learn by practicing and moving their bodies." (Teacher B)

"Children enjoy singing by moving their bodies. They don't feel shy to sing in groups. They learn the vocabulary faster by singing." (Teacher C)

Theme 2: Role-Play and Dramatic Play

The three respondents strongly referred to the implementation of role-play and scenarios through creative techniques in their English classes. This comprised creating real-life settings such as markets, hospitals, or restaurants to encourage conversational English.

"I set up a small clinic play station where one child took on the role of a doctor and another played the patient. They practiced using words such as 'headache,' 'I feel sick,' and even 'Can I help you?' The activity was enjoyable,

and the children learned more because they were actively engaged in the process of learning.” (Teacher B)

“Throughout the ‘Food topic’, we actually set up a mini restaurant. The children had menus and would say things like ‘I want noodles’ or ‘Can I get apple juice?’ All of this was conducted in English.” (Teacher A)

“Children engaged in role play in a market setting. One child acted as a fishmonger, while another played the role of a customer. They practiced phrases such as, ‘I want to buy big prawns’ and ‘How much is a kilo of crabs?’ Through this activity, they enjoyed playing their roles and learned new vocabulary.” (Teacher C)

Theme 3: Using visual and concrete materials

Another key strand was the importance of using visual and concrete materials in play-based English teaching. Teachers often created theme-based lesson plans where vocabulary was supported by play, books, artwork, and games related to a theme.

When teaching ‘Animals’, I brought toy animals, flashcards of animals, and played ‘Animal Charades’. They enjoyed guessing and making the sounds. It aided them in learning the names of animals.” (Teacher C)

We do a theme every week. For ‘Transport’, I played with toy cars and buses, I sang songs like ‘The Wheels on the Bus’, and we built an imaginary road out of blocks. The kids simply used the basic sentences like ‘I drive a yellow school bus’ or ‘My car is red.’ (Teacher B)

“When I taught ‘Fruits’ I brought toy fruits like apples, oranges, grapes, and pictures of durians, mangoes, and rambutans. The kids were excited, and they learn better.” (Teacher A)

Through the use of realia (objects from daily life), toys, and pictures, children’s learning becomes more meaningful and relevant. They can associate newly acquired vocabulary with familiar experiences and contexts, thereby promoting more holistic and enduring language development.

4.2. What Are Teachers’ Perceptions of Using Play-Based Learning in English Language Teaching?

When asked about the outcomes of integrating play into their instruction, all three teachers strongly agreed that it had a positive impact on promoting English language learning among the children. Four dominant themes were identified in this regard: enriching children’s vocabulary, fostering active engagement and motivation, improving confidence in communication, and developing speaking and listening skills.

Theme 1: Richer Vocabulary

Teachers made repeated comments that play allowed for richer vocabulary recollection and encouraged spontaneous speaking of English.

“I noted that they learn new words faster when they learn via songs or games. For example, after the ‘Fruit Basket’ game, they had carried over words like ‘apple’, ‘grapes’, and even used them in the course of other activities.” (Teacher A)

“As regular play activities, they speak more confidently these days. One quiet child is now able to say ‘I want to play with car’ or ‘Teacher, I love blue.’ It is a dramatic improvement.” (Teacher C)

“Play-based learning enriches children’s vocabulary through practice.” (Teacher B)

Theme 2: Active Engagement and Motivation

All respondents reported that play-based strategies involve children in active engagement and involvement in class. The children are also motivated to learn and look forward to learning English, and are more inclined to participate in class activities.

“Before I started doing play activities in class, some kids would quietly sit in class. But now, even the ones who don’t talk much are willing to join games. They learn better because they are happy.” (Teacher B)

“They associate English with having fun. That is the big difference. They enjoy coming to class and looking forward to learning.” (Teacher A)

“They enjoy learning...and are motivated to learn English.” (Teacher C)

Theme 3: Confidence to Communicate

The three teachers indicated that children became more confident in speaking English when they were consistently exposed to real-life communication through play-based activities.

“They don’t mind making errors while playing. That’s the courtesy of it. A girl would cry if she was required to talk, but now she volunteers during role-play!” (Teacher C)

“They speak more, inquire more, and try out new words when they play. It shows that they are becoming confident in speaking English.” (Teacher B)

“They try to speak in English...not shy of their mistakes.” (Teacher A)

Theme 4: Speaking and Listening Skills

In addition to speaking, teachers also observed that children’s listening skills improved as a result of playing interactively. This achievement indicates that play-based strategies not only treat expressive language skills but also enhance receptive skills.

“They learn to follow directions in English like ‘Sit down’, ‘Find the blue ball’, or ‘Put the apple in the basket’. They get used to these words gradually.” (Teacher A)

"...shy at first, one of the boys would not utter a word. But with role-playing and singing daily, now he talks plenty. He even tries to form his own sentences, such as 'I go play shop now.' He tries to speak in English. " (Teacher C)

"There's this girl who had a vocabulary problem. But through the utilization of flashcard games and puppet story-telling, she started using new words in regular language, like 'This is my umbrella' or 'I love banana. She also communicates with her friends in English..." (Teacher B)

Based on teachers' perceptions, it can be concluded that play-based learning enriches children's vocabulary within an enjoyable learning environment. Such activities actively engage children and motivate them to learn English. In addition, play-based learning fosters confidence among children in using the language, which further enhances their speaking and listening skills.

4.3. What Challenges Do Teachers Encounter When Implementing Play-Based Learning in English Language Instruction?

Although the teachers supported the use of play-based learning in the English classroom due to its various benefits, they also expressed concerns about the challenges and limitations they faced. Four broad themes emerged in this regard. First, time was described by all teachers as a major constraint, as syllabus coverage pressures often restricted the amount of time that could be devoted to quality play activities. Second, physical limitations, such as small classroom spaces and a lack of play materials and resources, were commonly highlighted. Under such conditions, certain types of play-based learning, such as role-play or movement-based games, are difficult to implement. Last, pressure from parents who are academically oriented and prefer the traditional methods of teaching,

Theme 1: Curriculum and Time Constraints

Time and curriculum constraints are faced by all three teachers. Teacher C worries that she will not be able to cover the syllabus if she employs play-based learning.

"Sometimes, there's just not enough time. The syllabus is full, and if I let them play too long, I fear we won't get everything done." (Teacher C)

"I am also worried that I cannot cover the syllabus if I use the play method." (Teacher B)

"I must follow the curriculum. A lot to teach. I face a time constraint because our time is limited. Not easy to use play-based learning. It is time-consuming." (Teacher A)

Theme 2: Limited Space

All three teachers viewed that they have limited space in the classroom to conduct play-based learning; however, Teacher B tried her best to employ this method.

"Our class is small. So, it's not easy to run games or give a proper dramatic play area. I do my best, but sometimes it's not possible..." (Teacher B)

"I can have a PlayStation if the classroom is bigger." (Teacher A)

"Our space is limited. Easier to carry out play-based learning in a bigger class." (Teacher C)

Theme 3: Limited resources

All three teachers opined that the teaching materials and resources are very limited in their preschools. Some teachers even resorted to purchasing their own teaching props and teaching materials. These limitations impose challenges in the implementation of play-based learning.

"I do buy some myself. Not all teachers can. If the school were able to provide more resources, we could do a great deal more with play." (Teacher A)

"Our teaching materials are limited. Very often I bring my own materials like fresh fruits." (Teacher B)

"For role play, we don't have props and clothes for children. I bring them from home, or sometimes I buy them." (Teacher C)

Theme 4: Pressure from parents

The three participants view that most parents are not in favour of play-based learning because they think it is a waste of time. They prefer conventional methods of teaching, such as rote learning and drilling. They also failed to provide support to the teachers in terms of materials and resources. As such, teachers find it difficult to implement play-based learning in classrooms.

"Some parents are very concerned about their children's academic performance. They prefer rote learning..." (Teacher A)

"...parents are not in favour of play-based learning, they think it is waste of time..." (Teacher C)

"I don't get support from parents in implementing play-based learning. They don't buy any materials for us..." (Teacher B)

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that preschool teachers implement play-based learning through music, songs, and movement. This aligns with Lee [58] who found that kinaesthetic and rhythmic exercises support language acquisition by engaging both auditory and bodily stimuli, thereby enhancing memory. It is in agreement with Lee [58] who determined that kinaesthetic and rhythmic exercises facilitate language acquisition by using both auditory and body stimuli, thus improving memory. Overall, the use of music, song, and movement in this study is consistent with literature highlighting the value of multimodal, interactive language learning in early childhood [28, 29]. The teachers' accounts further demonstrate that when activities are designed with explicit linguistic goals and facilitated within authentic classroom contexts, they can play a significant role in supporting vocabulary development, pronunciation, and student engagement.

In addition, teachers also use role play and dramatic play and engage the students actively in play settings in class. These exercises illustrate [8]. Social Constructivist Theory, where the children learn through engaged social interaction. By role-playing, the pupils not only increase their vocabulary but also learn sentence construction, intonation, and conversational rhythm in a natural and meaningful context. These findings are consistent with Bryce and Whitebread [18] who argued that dramatic play offers a safe psychological setting for language learners, especially in early childhood. Findings by Ciaramella and Dall'Orso [42]; Astuti and Afendi [40] and Schwartz, et al. [34] also reveal that children learn better through role play and storytelling. Role play and drama-based play enhance children's oral communication in English [30-32].

The analysis from the teachers' interviews demonstrates that the use of concrete materials and visual resources in play-based learning creates an enjoyable atmosphere in the ESL classroom, which facilitates vocabulary learning. These findings support findings by Aguilar [2]; Pyle, et al. [3] and Tobias [4].

Regarding the outcome of integrating play-based learning into their instruction, all three teachers agree that the play environment enriches children's vocabulary. Studies by Schwartz, et al. [34] and Mujahidah, et al. [15] also reveal that preschool children who are engaged in language play environments exhibit better vocabulary growth. These results also coincide with Hassinger-Das, et al. [35]; Kara and Eveyik-Aydin [59] and Palandi, et al. [36] who reported that learning vocabulary is significantly enhanced when children are mentally and physically involved in learning activities.

The results of this study also indicate that play-based activities create active engagement among children and enhance their motivation to learn. This is in accord with Kim [17] and Nair, et al. [60] who found that play-based learning enhances children's motivation to learn. The findings also show that play-based learning enhances children's confidence to communicate and improve their speaking and listening skills. The findings are consistent with findings by Lee and Liu [31] who discovered that drama-based play enhances children's oral communication skills and collaborative abilities. Whitebread, et al. [32] also stressed that play-based learning enhances problem-solving skills, social competence, and emotional resilience of children.

In terms of challenges in implementing play-based learning, the findings of this study indicate that teachers face constraints due to limited resources, time restrictions, limited space, a heavy syllabus, and parental pressure. This aligns with the findings of Hisham and Ying [47] who reported that Malaysian preschool educators struggle to balance curriculum requirements with the flexibility needed for play-based instruction. Limited teaching materials and resources present an additional challenge, to the extent that teachers often have to purchase their own. This echoes the concerns of Jobb [16] and Phang, et al. [61] who identified limited infrastructure and budget as essential challenges to implementing play-based learning. These findings are further supported by Yean & Izawati Ngadni [22], who highlighted that teachers encounter difficulties arising from time constraints, parental expectations, and inadequate resources.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that teachers employ a range of play-based strategies, including the use of music and songs, role play, exploratory thematic activities, and concrete materials such as flashcards, puppets, and manipulatives. Furthermore, children actively participate in enjoyable learning activities that motivate them to learn, while simultaneously developing the confidence to communicate in English. This, in turn, contributes to the improvement of their speaking and listening skills. Results of the interviews also indicate that play-based learning can enrich children's vocabulary through active engagement and enhance learning motivation among preschoolers. Teachers also found that play-based learning can improve speaking and listening skills among children in a natural setting. However, teachers agree that there are some challenges and limitations in implementing play-based learning, such as being restricted to the curriculum and syllabus, limited time frame, lack of space, and limited teaching materials and resources.

These findings have crucial theoretical, pedagogical, and practical implications. In terms of theoretical implications, the findings are parallel to Vygotsky [8] socio-cultural theory, which highlighted the role of social interaction and scaffolding in learning. The results also support [24] cognitive development theory, which emphasizes how children actively construct knowledge through exploration and play. In terms of pedagogy, the findings suggest that play-based learning can be effectively implemented in preschool settings, as it enhances children's English vocabulary, promotes active engagement in play activities, increases motivation and confidence to communicate, and strengthens speaking and listening skills. Finally, from a practical standpoint, the study recommends that the Ministry of Education provide training for preschool teachers on how to implement play-based learning effectively in the classroom.

This study has some limitations. First, the sample only consists of three ESL teachers from three private

preschools in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. As such, future researchers can use a larger sample to get more in-depth findings and better generalizations. Second, this qualitative study only uses semi-structured interviews to gather the data. It is recommended that future researchers employ class observations and surveys to collect the data for better triangulation and generalization.

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