

The Role of Play-Based Methods to Improve Students' English Language Skills in Secondary Schools in Gasabo District, Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

In some Rwandan schools, play-based methods are being used to improve students' English language skills. In G. S. Gikumba, language teachers have started using play-based methods to improve students' English language skills. The current study entitled "The role of play-based methods to improve students' English language skills in secondary schools in Gasabo District, Rwanda" was chosen in this context. The socio-cultural theory of play-based methods was used to guide this study. A descriptive research design was used with a sample of 8 English teachers from G. S. Gikumba. Data was collected using questionnaires. Targeted population was 8 English teachers from G. S. Gikumba. Purposive sampling was employed in this study. Descriptive analyses indicate that 100% of the respondents have a positive attitude towards play-based methods. The findings show that English teachers use play-based methods in teaching English, which helps to improve students' English language skills. The results of the study confirm the teachers' positive attitude towards play-based methods to improve students' English language skills. According to the research, the Rwanda Education Board should train English teachers and continue to update the existing English teachers on new strategies of using play-based methods to improve students' English language skills.

Keywords: Play-Based Methods, English Language, Skills, Secondary Schools

I. INTRODUCTION

English is a language that is used as an international communication tool (Kostyrya et al., 2022; Jenkins, 2007; Syzenko & Diachkova, 2020). In learning English, four basic components need to be mastered. According to Eslit and Valderama (2023), speaking skills are the most important in learning English because the main use of the language is to communicate with other people. Several aspects need to be considered including pronunciation, intonation, fluency and grammar (Sanz et al., 2013). This greatly affects the continuity of communication. Understanding these aspects can create good communication and lead to understanding (Sag & Wasow, 2011). Many students find it difficult to understand pronunciation or memorize vocabulary (Weisberg et al., 2013). Several methods can be used to improve students' English-speaking skills (Winthrop, 2016). Role play is an approach to learning through play processes such as drama, puppets, theatre and others so that students can learn quickly because they are accompanied by enthusiasm in the implementation of learning (Shuell, 1990).

Zhang (2009) considers role-playing as the method in his research that uses different variables, locations and research methods in this research. The researcher decides the title and problem of this research after finding the gap or filling the suggestion of the research before. The LEGO Foundation, a Danish group based in Denmark, aims to build a future where learning through play empowers children to become creative, engaged, lifelong learners. This goal is more important than ever. The world of today and tomorrow is a world of challenges, but also of great opportunities (Stahl & Feigenson, 2015). An increasingly interconnected and dynamic reality means that children will be faced with constant re-skilling and the need for lifelong learning as they grow up. Many children also face adversity in the form of stress, poverty and conflict (Zosh et al., 2013). They need positive experiences and coping skills to counterbalance the negative factors in their lives and to build their confidence and opportunities to make a difference. We believe it is essential to

nurture children's desire to learn, their ability to imagine alternatives and to connect with their environment in a positive way (Ghafouri, 2018).

Sitanggang et al. (2023) suggested the role and importance of children's learning through play. We begin by considering what it takes to thrive in a 21st century context, before defining learning in a broad sense: both as deep understanding of content and as learning to learn, building on children's natural affinity to learn and engage with their world from birth (Wood, 2013). We then draw on the science of effective learning, rigorous play research and neuroscience to explore the potential of playful experiences to promote deeper learning and a wider range of skills. We outline what is known, what the gaps are, and suggest future directions for research. The three boxes below summarize these findings under three headings: what we know, what we think, and what needs to be done (Parker et al., 2022).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The study seeks to understand the role and impact of learning through play in schools. Over the past five years, the LEGO Foundation and partners have reviewed the literature on learning through play and concluded that play is educational when it is fun, meaningful, actively engaging, iterative, and socially interactive (Zosh et al., 2017). The LEGO Foundation takes a holistic view that learning encompasses the full range of skills, including cognitive, social, emotional, creative and physical. This redefinition of play and learning provides the framework for this study. The evidence for the positive impact of learning through play on children's development is strong. However, many education systems have reduced opportunities for playful learning and increased the emphasis on didactic and structured approaches to learning for school readiness and achievement (Ladd et al., 2006). This recalibration is needed, as experts have established that learning through play supports the development of early literacy and numeracy skills in an integrated approach, while also developing children's social, emotional, physical and creative skills (Yee et al., 2022).

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To explore the strategies of the use of play-based methods for the improvement of English language skills;
- ii. To determine the challenges of play-based methods to improve English language skills;
- iii. To investigate the role of play-based methods to improve English language skills.

1.3 Research Questions

- i. What are the strategies for using play-based methods to improve English language skills?
- ii. What are the challenges of play-based methods for improving English language skills?
- iii. What is the role of play-based methods in improving English language skills?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study was inspired by the sociocultural theory of play based methods. According to Sociocultural theory (Play and the Gifted Child) Sociocultural theory – based on learning theory presented by Vygotsky (1978) – presents a view of the child as learner and the knowledge which is valued, which recognizes the influence of social and cultural contexts in learning. Such influences are seen as interactive. Social and cultural contexts influence how learning and development is understood and in return the individual child influences their social and cultural context. According to Zulfah et al. (2015), *Early Childhood Education: Society and Culture*. This approach to understanding the child as learner and the role of the adult is presented in the VEYLDF Practice Principles, in particular in the description of integrated teaching and learning approaches.

This approach supports young gifted children because the educator plans for learning experiences based on their awareness and evaluation of the child's current level of learning. Subsequent engagement by both the young gifted child and educator involves adult support or guided learning where the child gains appropriate new learning or skills. Such guidance usually involves sequential steps in learning new information or skills and is often described as scaffolding. Vygotsky termed the area of learning between what the child previously knew and the new level of understanding as the Zone of Proximal Development – ZPD. It involves scaffolding new learning or providing learning steps in a way that assists the child to move through the ZPD. Characteristically young gifted children may move quite quickly through sequential steps across ZPD, or may 'leap across' by suddenly have insight into the 'whole picture'. Children who learn in this way may be a visual spatial learner (Vouloumanos & Werker, 2007).

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Strategies of the Use of Play-Based Methods for the Improvement of English Language Skills

According to Harris (2023), play-based learning is an educational approach where students are guided into learning through activities and play of their choice. This method enables the development of crucial academic

foundations and social interaction skills, essential for their future scholastic success. Process-Focused-Play-based learning is about the journey, not the destination. The process of play is the most valuable part, especially since young children are less goal-oriented while they are playing (Haile & Ghirmai, 2024; Tekyi-Arhin, 2023).

According to Henisah et al. (2023), imaginative- Dramatic play and make-believe is an essential part of play for preschoolers and up. Even if it doesn't make sense to you, your students are creating stories in their head and expressing themselves. Entertaining- When setting up play-based learning activities, it's important to emphasize engaging learning experiences. Set up enough ways to play that kids are engaged, but not overwhelmed with options (Yee et al., 2022). According to Kong (2024), structured or unstructured- Structured play-based learning is directed by a teacher or facilitator, who acts as a mediator to help children use materials and deepen understanding. Unstructured play gives children time to engage in free play that's directed by their own interests and natural curiosity. Self-directed- The ideal play-based learning experience is child focused and lets them make their own decisions about what to play with and how they want to play. This ensures play is motivating and can help strengthen their problem-solving skills (Nuktong, 2010).

2.2.2 Challenges of Play-Based Methods to Improve English Language Skills

According to Newton and Nation (2021), lack of space can be like gold dust when it comes to early years' settings, depending on the type of learning environment it will bring different scenarios when trying to find space! For example, outdoor play in a child minder setting may be hindered if there is not enough space in the garden or yard. It could be that a pre-school has a large intake and carrying out certain activities would create potential health and safety issues. Or the size of the actual building may mean that temporary areas cannot be set up to the level of detail you would like. It is therefore a good idea to look at alternatives that still allow for learning opportunities. Getting children out of the room can be a great way to explore outdoor play in all of the above situations. This could mean going to a local park or woodland area where they can explore different environments and use the opportunity to learn about the wider world. Have a look at our great range of outdoor play activities to take with you. Fear of children getting hurt - While no career wants to see an injury in their setting, the chances of a few cuts and bruises are inevitable, it can be a frightening prospect to think of a child being injured in your care, but with some thoughtful preparation the chances of this happening can be reduced (Perrin et al., 2024). Ensure that risk assessments of your premises are carried out and that solutions are considered and recorded. Where possible, have enough space around your equipment so that it is not cluttered and manage the number of groups playing with certain activities.

Lack of resources and funding - There is no shying away from public spending cuts and the impact this can have on certain settings. It can be a struggle to replace tired equipment and play resources when funding is less than you need. Some settings have been known to ask the local community for donations. For example, in order to equip areas of permanent provision, there might be items on local sales sites that are given away for free. Another is to ask for donations of simple household recyclable items, such as used paper towel holders, egg cartons and cereal boxes. Having a resource bank for these things means that children have access to basic materials to make things and play with. A simple empty toilet roll can become a telescope to another universe. You can access this fantastic set of general early years role play resources by downloading and printing them out. There are some great, easy to make props that will encourage role play at no great cost.

According to Stevens (2007), play-based learning cannot reach all types of children. Children who are naturally shy may find it difficult to benefit from cooperative play and may become disinterested in the learning programme. Some parents may not understand the value of play. It can be common for parents to criticize your frequent inclusion of play-based learning in your curriculum, believing that academic programmes are a more appropriate educational model. Understanding these challenges can help educators prepare for any issues that may arise in their play-based environments: perceptions of lack of time to develop gamification approaches, lack of proven benefits, and classroom setting issues (Hunter, 2014).

2.2.3 Role of Play-Based Methods to Improve English Language Skills

According to Nittrouer et al. (2016), promotes language development; Play-based activities encourage children to engage in verbal communication, storytelling and imaginative play, which promotes language development. Through interaction with peers and adults, children learn new vocabulary, sentence structures and communication skills that are essential for literacy. According to Kumaran (2017), promotes phonological awareness; play-based activities such as singing, rhyming games and language play with sounds and words help to develop phonological awareness - the ability to recognize and manipulate the sounds of language. This fundamental skill is crucial for later literacy success. Storytelling, pretend play and dramatic play activities provide opportunities for children to engage with narrative structures, characters, settings and plots. By participating in storytelling and pretend play, children develop comprehension skills, sequencing skills and an understanding of story elements (Kayi, 2006).

Play-based learning activities naturally incorporate emergent literacy skills such as print awareness, letter recognition and understanding of written language conventions. Children can encounter print in a variety of contexts during play, such as signs, labels, books and props, which help them make connections between spoken and written language. According to Holt and Kysilka (2006), play-based learning environments provide access to a variety of literacy materials such as books, writing tools, alphabet manipulatives and literacy-themed props. According to Gardner and Lambert (1972), children are encouraged to explore these materials, experiment with writing and drawing, and engage in literacy-rich activities at their own pace and level of readiness. Play-based learning is inherently enjoyable and intrinsically motivating for children. When literacy activities are embedded in playful experiences, children are more likely to be engaged, enthusiastic and invested in learning. This positive attitude towards literacy lays the foundation for a lifelong love of reading and writing (Syzenko & Diachkova, 2020). Encourages critical thinking and problem solving; Play-based learning encourages critical thinking and problem-solving skills as children navigate imaginative scenarios, solve pretend problems and make decisions during play (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021).

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive research design. Leedy and Ormrod (2015) explain that descriptive research helps to determine and report things naturally with the characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, opinions or perceptions of a group or population being studied. This design was the most appropriate in the sense that it was well related to our study, which aimed to describe the current situation of teachers' adaptability to the use of game play in English teaching and learning in G.S. Gikumba.

3.2 Research Setting

Therefore, the research setting for this study consisted of 8 secondary school teachers from G.S. Gikumba, located in Bumbogo Sector of Gasabo District, Rwanda.

3.3 Research Population

According to Willie (2024), the target population refers to the specific group from which the researcher intends to collect information for his or her study. The target population for this study consisted of English language teachers from G.S. Gikumba in Gasabo District, making the total number of target population 8.

3.4 Sample Size

According to Creswell (2009), sample size is the number of observations or individuals included in a study or experiment. It is the number of individuals, items, or data points selected from a larger population to represent it statistically. In the current research, a survey was conducted with all 8 teachers.

3.5 Research Instruments and Data Collection

In this study, the researcher used questionnaires to collect data. The questionnaires contained three Likert scale questions. This choice was based on the fact that questionnaires are convenient, inexpensive and quick to use to collect extensive data from large sample groups. The researcher felt that the questionnaire was appropriate because it helped them to "assess aspects such as the behavior of the subjects, preferences, intentions, attitudes and opinions, which are in line with the scope of this research" (Gault, 1907).

The questionnaires' designations included statements with predetermined response options. These statements aimed at capturing information pertaining to the study variables, focusing on three key areas: to explore the strategies of the use of play-based methods; to determine the challenge of play-based methods; to investigate the role of play-based methods. The questionnaire examined the extent to the use of play-based methods. Each of the statements used close-ended statements, providing respondents with structured options for their responses.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This section presents the findings from the data collected and analyzed. It starts with the response rate and the demographic characteristics of the respondents, followed by the presentation and analysis of the data. The findings are in line with the objectives of the study: The role of play-based methods in improving students' English language skills. The findings were presented using descriptive and inferential statistics. This was done in tables and discussions.



4.2 Response Rate

The research sample consisted of 8 English teachers from secondary schools in the Gasabo District of Rwanda who responded to the questions focusing on the role of play-based methods in improving students' English language skills. The responses to the research questions provided insightful perspectives on various aspects of English language skills.

Table 1
Response Rate

Sampled	Responded	Response Rate
8	8	100%

Table 1 above shows the study sample of 8 English teachers from G.S. Gikumba in Gasabo District, Rwanda. All respondents answered the questions focusing on the role of play-based methods in improving students' English language skills.

Table 2
Distribution of Respondents According to Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Characteristic	Frequency Distribution	Percentage	
Age	18 to 23		
	24 to 29	4	50%
	30 to 35	2	25%
	36 to 40	1	12.5%
	Above 41		
Gender	Male	3	37.5%
	Female	5	62.5%

The results showed that most of the teachers (4; i.e. 50%) who participated in this study were between 24 and 29 years old, followed by 2 (25%) who were between 30 and 35 years old. In addition, 1 teacher (12.5%) was between 36 and 40 years old. Therefore, the study concludes that most of the English teachers at G.S. Gikumba are between 24 and 29 years old. In terms of gender, 5 (62.5%) of the teachers are female while 3 (37.5%) are male.

4.3 Presentation of Findings

4.3.1 Strategies of the Use of Play-Based Methods for the Improvement of English Language Skills

Table 3
Distribution of Responses to the Strategies of the Use of Play-Based Methods for the Improvement of English Language Skills

Statements	A	%	D	%
Do you help learners to have a goal in mind while they are playing?	7	87.5	1	12.5
Do you help learners to create stories in their heads and express themselves?	8	100	0	0
Do you engage learners in free play guided by their own interests and natural curiosity?	7	87.5	1	12.5
Do you help children use materials and deepen their understanding as they play?	6	75	2	25
Do you give children the opportunity to explore the world and gather new information?	8	100	0	0
Do you help your learners to be motivated and to strengthen their ability to solve problems?	7	87.5	1	12.5

Key: A=Agree; D=Disagree

Table 3 shows the strategies of using play-based methods for improving English language skills as the result from the respondents where 87.5% agreed that they help learners to have a goal in mind while they play while 12.5% disagreed, 100% agreed that they help learners to create stories in their minds and express themselves, 87.5% agreed that they engage learners in free play guided by their own interests and natural curiosity while 12.5% disagreed, 75% agreed and 25% disagreed that they help children to use materials and deepen their understanding through play, 100% agreed that they give children the opportunity to explore the world and gather new information, and 87.5% agreed and 12.5% disagreed that they help to motivate learners and develop their problem-solving skills. This current research is similar to the study conducted by Kong (2024), structured or unstructured- Structured play-based learning is directed by

a teacher or facilitator, who acts as a mediator to help children use materials and deepen understanding. Unstructured play gives children time to engage in free play that's directed by their own interests and natural curiosity. Self-directed-The ideal play-based learning experience is child focused and lets them make their own decisions about what to play with and how they want to play. Henisah et al. (2023), imaginative- Dramatic play and make-believe is an essential part of play for preschoolers and up. Even if it doesn't make sense to you, your students are creating stories in their head and expressing themselves. Entertaining- When setting up play-based learning activities, it's important to emphasize engaging learning experiences.

4.3.2 Challenges of Play-Based Methods to Improve English Language Skills

Table 4

Distribution of Responses to the Challenges of Play-Based Methods to Improve English Language Skills

Statements	A	%	D	%
Practical challenges in implementing play-based pedagogy, such as a lack of professional development or training in play	6	75	2	25
Lack of time to develop gamification approaches; a lack of proven benefits and issues with the classroom environment	7	87.5	1	12.5
Lack of resources and funding to replace old materials to help learners play	8	100	0	0
Some learners feel threatened or nervous when asked to role play because it involves acting	6	75	2	25

Key: A=Agree; D=Disagree

Table 4 shows the challenges of play-based methods for improving English language skills as a result of the respondents where 75% agreed and 25% disagreed that practical challenges in implementing play-based pedagogy such as a lack of professional development or training in play, 87.5% agreed and 12.5% disagreed that lack of time to develop gamification approaches, a lack of proven benefits and issues with the classroom environment, 100% agreed that they lacked resources and funding to replace old materials to help learners play and 75% agreed and 25% disagreed that some learners feel threatened or nervous when asked to role play because it involves acting. This current research is similar to the study conducted by Stevens (2007) where play-based learning cannot reach all types of children. Children who are naturally shy may find it difficult to benefit from cooperative play and may become disinterested in the learning programme. Some parents may not understand the value of play. Hunter (2014) found that it can be common for parents to criticize your frequent inclusion of play-based learning in your curriculum, believing that academic programmes are a more appropriate educational model. Understanding these challenges can help educators prepare for any issues that may arise in their play-based environments: perceptions of lack of time to develop gamification approaches, lack of proven benefits, and classroom setting issues.

4.3.3 Role of Play-Based Methods to Improve English Language Skills

Table 5

Distribution of Responses to the Role of Play-Based Methods to Improve English Language Skills

Statements	A	%	D	%
Play-based learning is inherently enjoyable and intrinsically motivating for children.	8	100	0	0
Play-based learning activities naturally incorporate emergent literacy skills such as print awareness, letter recognition and understanding of written language conventions.	7	87.5	1	12.5
Play-based activities encourage children to communicate verbally, tell stories and use imaginative play to develop language.	8	100	0	0
Play helps children learn to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts and manage social interactions, all of which are important for literacy development and success in school.	7	87.5	1	12.5
Children are encouraged to explore these materials, experiment with writing and drawing, and engage in literacy-rich activities at their own pace and level of understanding.	8	100	0	0

Key: A=Agree; D=Disagree

Table 5 shows the role of play-based methods in improving English language skills as a result of the respondents where 100% agreed that play-based learning is inherently enjoyable and intrinsically motivating for children, 87.5% agreed and 12.5% disagreed Play-based learning activities naturally incorporate emergent literacy skills such as print awareness, letter recognition and understanding of written language conventions, 100% agreed that play-based activities encourage children to communicate verbally, tell stories and use imaginative play to develop language, 87.5% agreed and 12.5% disagreed play helps children learn to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts and interact socially which are important for literacy development and success in school, and 100% agreed that children are encouraged to explore

these materials, experiment with writing and drawing and engage in literacy rich activities at their own pace and level of understanding. This current research is similar to the study conducted by Kumaran (2017): promoting phonological awareness; play-based activities such as singing, rhyming games and language play with sounds and words help to develop phonological awareness - the ability to recognize and manipulate the sounds of language. This fundamental skill is crucial for later literacy success. Storytelling, pretend play and dramatic play activities provide opportunities for children to engage with narrative structures, characters, settings and plots. Lie (2006) encourages critical thinking and problem solving; play-based learning encourages critical thinking and problem-solving skills as children navigate imaginative scenarios, solve pretend problems and make decisions during play.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

This research adopted the descriptive research design. As a matter of fact, descriptive research helps to determine and report things naturally with the characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, opinions or perceptions of a group or population being studied. It took place in G. S. Gikumba which is situated in Bumbogo Sector in Gasabo District. The target population was 8 respondents from G.S. Gikumba. The sample size was 8 English teachers. The researchers used questionnaires to collect data. This study highlighted the strategies of using play-based methods to improve English language skills, the challenge of using play-based methods to improve students' English language skills and the role of play-based methods to improve students' English language skills.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the results collected in the field and the analyses made accordingly, some recommendations have been made. In fact, teachers should use the play-based methods to improve English language skills, identify the challenges of using play-based methods to improve English language skills and find the solutions to overcome these challenges, and the role of play-based methods to improve English language skills occurs as a result of good practice of play-based methods. Considering that not all teachers are aware of the use of play-based methods, the Rwanda Education Board should train English teachers and continue to update the existing English teachers on new strategies of using play-based methods to improve students' English language skills.

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