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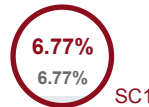
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Integrating Play-Based Learning to Enhance English Vocabulary and Social Interaction in Kindergarten Learners

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Abstract. Early childhood is a pivotal stage for language development and social interaction. While Play-Based Learning (PBL) has long been recognized for fostering creativity and emotional growth, its specific potential in supporting second language vocabulary acquisition remains underexplored. Despite the long-standing implementation of English instruction at RA Anak Emas, conventional methods still dominate, often lacking the contextual engagement young learners need. This study addresses that gap by examining how integrating English vocabulary instruction into various types of classroom games enhances both linguistic mastery and social interaction in kindergarten learners. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, the study observed 18 students aged 4-6 over eight weeks through structured non-participant observation. Using Edwards' play typology-open-ended, modelled, and purposefully-framed play-the research focused on indicators of vocabulary use and social engagement, such as turn-taking, cooperation, and spontaneous language production. Findings revealed that all three types of play fostered active involvement, contextualized vocabulary use, and peer collaboration. Notably, the study uncovered recurring behaviors related to empathy and cognitive initiative that extended beyond Edwards' framework. As a result, the researchers proposed a new category Interpersonal Constructive Play which captures the emotionally rich and idea-driven interactions often overlooked in traditional play taxonomies. This conceptual contribution expands the theoretical landscape of PBL and emphasizes the need for play environments that balance structure with space for spontaneous, empathetic, and cognitively active expression. The findings offer practical implications for early childhood educators and curriculum designers aiming to create holistic and inclusive English language learning experiences.

Keywords - Play-Based Learning, English Vocabulary Acquisition, Social Interaction, Early Childhood Education, Interpersonal-Constructive Play

1. I. Introduction

Early childhood education is a critical period for basic development, especially in the areas of language acquisition and social interaction. Young children demonstrate natural curiosity and enthusiasm, making them highly responsive to immersive and experience-based learning approaches. One of the most developmentally appropriate and effective methods at this stage is Play-Based Learning (PBL) [1], which encourages active participation, intrinsic motivation, and meaningful involvement through play [2]. While play is often associated with social-emotional and motor development, it also offers significant potential for language learning, particularly vocabulary acquisition in a second language such as English. At this age, children build vocabulary not through mechanical memorization, but through contextual, engaging, and repeated exposure to words during play activities. Integrating English vocabulary into play-based scenarios helps young children form connections between words and real-life experiences, leading to better retention and usage.

Research by Edwards [3] categorizes play into three main types; open-ended play, modeled play, and purposefully designed play. Each of which supports social interaction and language acquisition in unique ways. Open-ended play, where children lead without fixed outcomes, encourages spontaneous language use and social negotiation. This allows children to name objects, express needs, and describe scenarios, thereby expanding vocabulary through peer-to-peer dialogue. Modelled play, where teachers participate and demonstrate language use, introduces new vocabulary in meaningful contexts. This supports the scaffolding process, where learners gradually internalise and use new words observed during modelled interactions.

Purposely designed games, guided by specific learning objectives (such as naming colors or identifying actions in English), allow for targeted vocabulary instruction while maintaining the excitement and social involvement of the game. These types of games not only provide rich language input but also create opportunities for interaction, turn-taking, and cooperative problem-solving [4]. When vocabulary instruction is integrated into interactive social games, children are more likely to engage in meaningful communication, practice using new words, and reinforce their understanding through collaboration with peers [5].

Although English language instruction has been implemented at RA Anak Emas for several years, conventional methods remain the mainstay. Integrating vocabulary learning into game-based activities offers an alternative that is more developmentally appropriate and engaging for young students [6]. PBL has been widely recognized for promoting creativity, emotional regulation, and social development [7], but its potential as a tool for language acquisition, especially in the context of a second language, remains underutilized in early childhood education settings. Most existing literature emphasizes cognitive or emotional outcomes without explaining how a structured yet enjoyable environment can enhance language and interpersonal development [8]. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how integrating English vocabulary instruction into various forms of classroom games affects both language mastery and social interaction among kindergarten students. This research focuses not only on vocabulary development but also on the nature of children's involvement, peer relationships, and communicative competence in a play-based learning environment. By exploring the intersection of social and linguistic development through the lens of PBL, this study aims to provide practical insights for early childhood educators in designing effective and holistic learning experiences. Specifically, this study will answer the question: How does Play-Based Learning influence students social interaction in English learning vocabulary at RA Anak Emas ?

2. II. Method

This study uses a Descriptive Qualitative research design to explore how play-based learning activities support the development of English vocabulary and social interaction among kindergarten learners. This approach enables detailed observation of naturally occurring behaviors in classroom settings, with attention to how different types of play contribute to students' linguistic and social development. The research was conducted at RA Anak Emas, involving 18 students aged 4-6 years old and 2 classroom teachers. The school was selected due to its consistent implementation of English instruction within a play-based framework. While English has been taught for several years at the institution, this study focuses specifically on the integration of vocabulary learning into play-based activities, guided by the framework of Edwards [3]: Open-ended play: spontaneous, child-led play. Modelled play: play activities demonstrated or scaffolded by teachers. Purposefully-framed play: structured play with explicit learning goals. Data were collected exclusively through non-participant classroom observation, using a structured observation table adapted from the typology of play by Edwards [3]. The observation instrument was developed to document specific indicators across two key domains: Vocabulary development - including indicators such as: Spontaneous use of English vocabulary during play, repetition and retention of newly introduced words, use of words in contextually appropriate situations. Social interaction - including: Turn-taking and cooperation, verbal negotiation and expression, conflict resolution and peer assistance. Observations were conducted three times per week over a period of eight weeks. Each observation session lasted approximately 30 minutes and took place during classroom activities designed to represent one or more types of play (open-ended, modelled, or purposefully-framed). The observation table was validated by early childhood education experts to ensure relevance and clarity of the behavioral indicators.

Data analysis in this study followed four systematic steps to ensure clarity and relevance. First, the observation checklist data were rewritten into descriptive narratives to capture detailed behaviors during play activities. This data was then categorized according to Edwards' typology [3] of open-ended play, modeled play, and purposefully framed play - based on the nature of the observed interactions and vocabulary use. An editing process was applied to filter out unrelated behaviors, focusing only on indicators of English vocabulary acquisition and social interaction. The filtered data was then summarized and analyzed to identify patterns of how different types of games facilitated communication, cooperation, and language use.

III. Findings

1. To gain a deeper understanding of how Play-Based Learning affects children's social interactions and their English vocabulary development, a series of classroom observations were conducted over a three-week period. These observations were based on a structured checklist instrument, developed in accordance with Edwards typology [3] of play, which includes open-ended play, modeled play, and purposefully designed play. Additionally, two emerging aspects, empathy and cognitive initiative, were included as potential extensions of this framework, conceptualized within the proposed Interpersonal-Constructive Play dimension. The observation tool not only recorded the presence of specific behaviors but also documented the richness of children's actions, expressions, and verbal interactions during play. This approach allows for a broader depiction of how play not only facilitates involvement and enjoyment but also meaningful peer relationships and language use in an authentic classroom environment. The Table 1 summarizes the aspects observed in Play-Based Learning and illustrates how various forms of play support student developmental progress over a three-week period.

2.

3. Table 1. Observed Aspects of Play-Based Learning in Relation adapted from Edwards' Play Framework [3]

No	Aspects of PBL	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Function of PBL
Examples of Activities					
Game Type					
	Role Modeling (Market, Tailor-Customer)	Playing blocks, puzzles	Snake ladder, forming something from sand		
Open-Ended Play					
1	Student involvement in play activities	✓	✓	✓	Students seem enthusiastic in every game, especially when role-playing. "I'm the seller, you buy it, ya"
2	Students' emotional involvement (expressions of happiness, satisfaction, etc.)	✓	✓	✓	Children seem happy, often smiling and laughing while playing. The child laughs when he sees his friend's block falling
3	Cooperation and collaboration in groups	✓	✓	✓	Students share tasks in construction games and role-playing. "Please, hold my blocks, ya"
4	Verbal and nonverbal interaction between students	✓	✓	✓	Interaction increases as group play begins. The child points to a puzzle and invites his friend to put it together
6	Nonverbal communication (gestures, facial expressions)	✓	✓	✓	Enthusiastic gestures and happy expressions are often seen during play. Child measures waist to measure clothes
Modelled Play					
7	Courage to take an active role	✓	✓	✓	Children confidently choose roles and perform in front of friends. "Miss, I want to build a tower"
8	Ability to listen to teacher instructions	✓	✓	✓	Children listen to the teacher's instructions with focus during the play session. Teacher said "Shape turtle from sand" child makes without repetition

Purposefully-Framed Play

- | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|--|---|---|---|---|
| 9 | Active involvement in game roles | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Children actively choose roles and follow the rules of the game. "I'm a traders, jualan sayur ya, Miss?" |
| 10 | Focus and concentration during play | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Children are able to focus for 15-20 minutes per game session. Children focus on building a building out of blocks for 15 minutes |
| 11 | Willingness to wait for a turn to play | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Children are able to queue and wait patiently for their turn. Queue to pay at checkout |
| Interpersonal-Constructive Play | | | | | |
| 12 | Concern for the feelings or needs of friends (potensi novelty) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Children show empathy when friends are struggling. "I'll help you to membangun the blocks, ya." |
| 13 | Activeness in asking questions or giving new ideas | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Some children give new game ideas during group play sessions. "Let's play puzzle, Miss" |

4.

5. Table 1 presents the implementation of the observation over three weeks, it appears consistently that children show active involvement as well as high social-emotional participation in various game-based learning activities. The variety of activities range from imaginative role-playing, such as pretending to be a market trader or tailor, to more structured games such as arranging blocks, solving puzzles, playing snake and ladder, and forming sand. Each activity provides a unique context to observe how students interact, communicate, and respond emotionally and cognitively to the assigned tasks. Children actively take the initiative in setting roles, inviting playmates, sharing toys, and expressing joy and empathy throughout the session. For example, one child confidently says, "I'm the seller, you buy it, ya" while another helps his friend build a tower block by saying, "Please hold my blocks, ya" Their facial expressions, laughter, and spontaneous conversation indicate a lively social environment and support the natural development of language and social competence through play. All of these findings were documented using structured observation sheets adapted from Edwards' game typology [3] and supplemented with contextual field records. From this series of observations, certain behavior patterns began to appear that showed a variety of interactions and learning strategies influenced by the type and structure of the game carried out. These behaviors are then classified based on three categories of play according to Edwards [3]: open-ended play, modelled play, and purposefully-framed play. However, there were also two additional behavioral patterns that consistently appeared in each session, namely empathy for peers and spontaneity in proposing new ideas. These two characteristics cannot be fully included in the existing typological category, thus giving rise to the need for further theoretical reflection on the unique contribution of this form of involvement to the child's learning process.

6. Open-Ended Play is characterized by interactions that are entirely initiated by the child, with flexibility in taking on social roles. Children are given the freedom to create narratives, set the flow of the game, and set their own rules without adult intervention. This type of game encourages independence, peer-to-peer negotiation, and emotional expression. For example, when a child laughs at the sight of their friend's block tower collapsing or invites their friend to solve a puzzle together, they are engaging in a spontaneous but meaningful social exchange. These findings are in line with the concept of open play from Edwards [3], which emphasizes exploratory learning that arises naturally from children's own interests and interactions.

7. In contrast, Modeled Play reflect a form of interaction facilitated by teachers, where guidance is provided through demonstrations and verbal instruction. The results of the observation showed that students were able to pay close attention to the teacher's directions and showed increased confidence when taking active roles. For example, when the teacher gives the instruction, "Shape turtle from sand," the children do so without the need for excessive repetition of commands, demonstrating their ability to apply the modeled actions independently. This supports the view that modelled games serve as a scaffolding tool for cognitive and linguistic development, especially in the early stages of vocabulary acquisition.

8. On the other hand, Purposefully-Framed Play involves more structured activities with clear rules and specific learning objectives. Activities such as role-playing games that involve turn-by-turn or board games with rules encourage children to focus, follow directions, and use language intentionally. For example, students learn to wait their turn patiently while role-playing as a cashier and customer, using polite expressions, and obeying the rules of the game. These moments reflect Edwards' description [3] of directional play as an effective means of combining learning objectives with fun involvement.

9. Outside of these three categories, the study identified patterns of behavior that were repetitive and prominent but not accommodated within Edwards' framework [3], namely the expression of empathy and the child's initiative in creating new ideas during play. Children actively provide support to friends who are struggling and propose new activities, such as "I'll help you membangun the blocks," and "Let's play puzzles, Miss." These behaviors are not entirely spontaneous or structured, but rather reflect a form of play rooted in relational sensitivity and cognitive leadership. To illustrate this phenomenon, we propose an additional category called Interpersonal-Constructive Play which is a form of play that emphasizes empathic interaction, collaborative creation of meaning, and the contribution of ideas that arise naturally in the social context of play.

10. The addition of this category expands Edwards' typology [3] by including developmental aspects that combine emotional intelligence and cognitive initiative, two important elements that are very real in the context of early childhood education, but are underrepresented in existing game frameworks. By recognizing Interpersonal-Constructive Play, educators gain a deeper lens to identify as well as facilitate the high-level social-cognitive competencies that develop through play. Pedagogically, this shows that a game-based learning environment should not only support autonomy, guidance, and structure, but also deliberately foster empathy, leadership, and collaboration of ideas. In the context of learning English vocabulary, this kind of environment becomes increasingly valuable because it allows language to grow through emotionally meaningful interactions, supported by peers, and initiated by the child's own initiative. Therefore, Play-Based Learning, which is designed and interpreted reflectively through established and new frameworks, provides a holistic pathway to encourage language development, social competence, and interpersonal growth in early childhood.

11.

IV. Discussion

1. The results of this study indicate that the Play-Based Learning (PBL) approach is simultaneously able to encourage the development of English vocabulary and improve social interaction skills in early childhood. During the three-week classroom observation process, it was seen that the children were actively involved in various forms of play, both directed by the teacher and those that emerged spontaneously from student initiative. Activities such as role-playing, arranging blocks, playing sand, and board games such as snakes and ladders, have proven to be effective mediums in creating natural interactions [9], using vocabulary in meaningful contexts, and fostering the value of cooperation and empathy between children [10].

2. These findings provide reinforcement to the results of previous studies that stated that learning through play contributes not only to cognitive aspects, but also to support social and emotional development integrally [11][12][13]. In the context of play, children gain the opportunity to expand their vocabulary, practice active listening, respond to social situations, share, and resolve conflicts independently. Research conducted by [14][15], also emphasized that classroom routines that integrate play provide a natural opportunity for children to acquire new languages through repetition in meaningful contexts. The results of observations in this study support these findings, where students are more enthusiastic and expressive in using

English when playing compared to during formal instructional activities. The analysis of the results of the study using the game typology framework proposed by [3], which includes Open-Ended Play, Modelled Play, and Purposefully-Framed Play, shows that each type of play, plays an important role in the child's learning process. In open-ended play, it appears that students demonstrate the ability to lead the game independently, negotiate, and communicate without direct intervention from the teacher. These results are in line with the views of [16], who stated that free play encourages self-expression and social exploration at large. In modelled play, students show a positive response to the teacher's stimulation through imitation of verbal expressions and actions, indicating the existence of a deep scaffolding in the language acquisition process. Edwards [3] himself emphasized that the role of teachers in modeling games can form a more directed learning structure. Meanwhile, in purposefully-framed play, children are seen actively following the rules of educational games, such as snakes and ladders used to introduce numbers and instructions in English. Research by [17] also supports the idea that structured play can develop social and academic competence simultaneously.

3. However, the study also found dimensions of the play experience that were not fully covered in all three categories of play according to Edwards [3], especially in the aspects of empathy and thought leadership shown by children. In this context, students not only play, but also show emotional attention to friends as well as the ability to propose game ideas reflectively. For example, they often offer help or suggest new games that can be done together. Therefore, the researcher proposes an additional dimension called interpersonal-constructive play, which is a form of play that emphasizes empathetic, collaborative, and initiative thinking from within the child. This concept reflects that play is not just a social activity, but also a space for the formation of affective relationships and cognitive initiative that are an important foundation for the development of 21st-century skills [18][19]. The theoretical contribution of this study also enriches the discourse on the importance of intentional teaching in the context of play-based learning. This is in line with the opinion of [20][3], who emphasize the importance of a balance between spontaneous play and clear learning goals. In this case, interpersonal-constructive play can be seen as a form of link between children's freedom of expression and the pedagogical structure designed by educators. These findings are reinforced by the studies of [21][22], which concluded that the effectiveness of PBL is highly dependent on the quality of social interaction and emotional involvement that children experience in play activities.

4. In terms of practical implementation, the results of this study provide direction for early childhood educators to design a learning environment that is not only rich in games, but also provides space for the emergence of student empathy, creativity, and initiative. The PBL approach needs to be understood comprehensively as a pedagogical strategy that includes cognitive, social, emotional, and linguistic aspects in a balanced manner [23][24][25]. In a broader framework, national education policies and curricula also need to pay more attention to this approach in order to be optimally integrated into daily educational practices. In conclusion, this study not only strengthens the existing theory, but also expands it by introducing a new category in the typology of games. The interpersonal-constructive play dimension is expected to be a starting point for further research, as well as provide inspiration for curriculum development, teacher training, and learning design that is more contextual, inclusive, and in accordance with the needs of children in this modern era.

5.

IV. Conclusion

1. This study concludes that Play-Based Learning (PBL) is an effective and developmentally appropriate approach for enhancing both English vocabulary acquisition and social interaction among kindergarten learners. Through systematic classroom observations at RA Anak Emas, it was found that various types of play-open-ended, modelled, and purposefully-framed-provided natural and meaningful contexts for language use, peer cooperation, and emotional engagement. Notably, children showed a high level of initiative, empathy, and cognitive participation during play activities, suggesting that play functions **not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a catalyst for** interpersonal development. The study also identifies the emergence of a new dimension called Interpersonal-Constructive Play, which highlights children's ability to express empathy and propose creative ideas during play an aspect not fully covered by existing play typologies. This proposed category broadens the theoretical framework of play-based learning by incorporating emotional intelligence and leadership into early childhood pedagogy. These findings imply that educators should design play environments that integrate structured learning goals with opportunities for spontaneous social and emotional interaction. Future research is recommended to explore how Interpersonal-Constructive Play can be implemented across diverse educational contexts and how it influences long-term linguistic and social outcomes. By acknowledging and fostering these elements, early childhood education can more holistically support children's development in the 21st century.

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