Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Education Innovation and Philosophical Inquiries
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.33846

Exploring the Impact of Play-Based Learning on Classroom Engagement and Vocabulary Development in Early Additional Language Learning

Keni Yu

IOE Psychology & Human Development Department, University College London, London, UK
keni.yu.23@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract. This essay explores the impact of play-based learning on classroom engagement and vocabulary development in early additional language learning, with a primary focus on Key Stage 1 (KS1) learners while drawing selectively on comparable evidence from preschool and lower primary contexts. The essay first clarifies key concepts, including play-based learning, guided play, classroom engagement, and vocabulary development, before examining empirical research on learning outcomes and engagement processes. Overall, the essay suggests that play-based learning is particularly promising for enhancing classroom engagement, especially in relation to participation, enjoyment, and sustained involvement. It can also support vocabulary development, including vocabulary acquisition, retention, and contextualised understanding, although the evidence is less uniform and depends more heavily on pedagogical design and implementation. Across the reviewed studies, the most effective forms of play-based learning appear to be purposeful, language-rich, socially interactive, and carefully scaffolded by teachers while still preserving child agency. Therefore, this essay concludes that, for KS1 additional language classrooms, the value of play-based learning depends less on the mere presence of play, but in creating developmentally appropriate environments that support both meaningful participation and language learning.

Keywords: PlayBased Learning in Early Multilingual Education, Classroom Engagement and Child Agency, Vocabulary Development, Teacher Scaffolding in Language Learning

1. Introduction

Early additional language learning is increasingly valued in early years and primary education [1]. This trend reflects the sustained attention of educators and families towards the potential of early language learning [2]. However, for young learners, language learning is not as straightforward as getting exposed earlier. Simply increasing exposure does not necessarily produce positive outcomes, as the quality, structure, and pedagogical framing of that exposure appear to be equally decisive factors [3]. The central concern, therefore, lies in programme design and pedagogical approach. Existing research has shown that early foreign language programs can promote additional language development without diminishing children's other languages [4]. However, the results are highly

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.33846

dependent on programme-related factors, such as input quality, teacher strategies, language policy, and classroom environment [4]. Therefore, it is crucial to address pedagogy in early additional language education systematically.

In primary education, playful learning is described as having the characteristics of joy, meaning, social interaction, and active engagement [5]. This guided play is particularly important as it combines learning objectives, child agency, and flexible adult guidance [6]. These features theoretically support young learners' attention, motivation, memory, and participation [7]. But whether this potential translates into positive language learning outcomes in reality still depends on the actual implementation in the classroom [8].

Although play-based learning has a theoretical foundation, its application in early foreign language classrooms is often not ideal [9]. A number of studies have pointed out that playful elements in the classroom do not always equate to true play-based pedagogy [10]. They are usually easily misinterpreted as teacher-centred, target-language-only practices, tools oriented towards school readiness, and instead compress child agency [9]. Therefore, it is necessary to reorganise existing research to explore the impact of play-based learning on early additional language learning. This essay will focus on two core variables, classroom engagement and vocabulary development, with Key Stage 1 (KS1) learners as the primary target group, while selectively drawing on similar evidence from preschool and lower primary contexts.

2. Conceptual foundations

2.1. The concept of play-based learning in language education

Regarding the terminology in play in education, there is still some conceptual vagueness and overlap. Heidari-Shahreza stated that play-based learning and playful learning are often used interchangeably [11]. In the literature on primary education, Li and Kangas also found that playful learning, play-based learning, and learning through play are often grouped together as the same pedagogical family, and described as having the characteristics of being meaningful, socially interactive, and actively engaging [5]. Therefore, this essay adopts play-based learning as an umbrella for the above terms. Because it is closely linked to the context of the KS1 classroom, and it also incorporates guided play and playful learning as related sub-concepts.Accordingly, play-based learning is defined in this essay as a goal-oriented pedagogical activity that allows for purposeful teacher guidance while maintaining joy, child agency, and social engagement.

Furthermore, Heidari Shahreza distinguished among related concepts [11]. Game-based learning uses games as a learning tool, while gamification involves incorporating game elements such as points, rewards, and missions into non-game tasks. They both fall under the concept of broad playful learning, but are not equivalent to play-based learning. Therefore, this essay considers both digital and non-digital game-based language learning as embedded forms of play-based pedagogy.

2.2. Classroom engagement and vocabulary development in early additional language learning

While engagement in language acquisition is closely related to concepts such as motivation, interest, participation, and agency, it is not the same as any of these [12]. According to Zhang et al., learner engagement can be understood as the extent to which learners actively participate in academic activities [13]. And it is a multidimensional process that connects learners with language knowledge, which can be reflected in three dimensions of behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Behavioural engagement refers to observable task involvement, such as sustained participation,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.33846

attention to learning materials, and time investment. Cognitive engagement is the mental effort and processing generated to achieve learning objectives. Learners' affective reactions and regulations are related to their emotional engagement, for example their interest, perceived value, and sense of satisfaction.

In early additional language learning, vocabulary is considered one of the most critical learning contents [14]. Li et al. defined it as learners promoting the acquisition and accurate use of vocabulary through a series of behaviours [15]. They also emphasised that traditional drill-based instruction often struggles to maintain learner engagement and long-term retention, highlighting the importance of investigating more interactive teaching methods such as play-based learning. Naderi and Moafian not only distinguish between vocabulary learning and retention, but also point out that for children, contextualised vocabulary learning is often more boring and demotivating, while play can promote learning outcomes through enjoyable activities, meaningful contexts, and improved recall [16]. In order to have a more systematic understanding of its mechanism in early additional language education, the following sections will examine how play-based learning affects vocabulary development and classroom engagement.

3. Play-based learning and vocabulary development

3.1. Evidence for a positive relationship

Overall, existing research generally supports the positive effect of play-based learning on vocabulary development among young language learners, although this relationship is neither uniform nor pedagogically simple. Specifically, a mixed-method study conducted by Li et al. on the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning experience of Chinese elementary school students found that both playful pedagogical activities and traditional teaching methods significantly improved students' vocabulary learning, but there was no significant difference in post-English vocabulary tests between experimental and control groups [15]. Meanwhile, Li et al. explicitly emphasised that playful pedagogical activities are considered innovative and valuable by students and teachers, and they describe playful activities as interactive, enjoyable, and actively participatory tasks [15]. That is to say, the advantage of playful pedagogy may not necessarily be reflected in short-term test superiority, but more likely in the quality of the learning process. In addition, Naderi and Moafian's quasi-experiment on primary school EFL learners revealed that non-digital play-based instructions outperformed digital formats in both post-test and delayed post-test, indicating that certain play-based forms can not only promote immediate learning but also vocabulary retention [16]. Therefore, the above evidence supports an overall positive association between play-based learning and vocabulary development, but evidence is heterogeneous, and the strength of the effect appears to depend on the form and implementation of play.

More specifically, vocabulary development is not a singular outcome; it should be broken down into immediate acquisition, retention over time, and depth of understanding. For example, Chowdhury et al. found in a digital game-making workshop that young learners' vocabulary pre-post scores significantly improved, and in open-ended responses, complete understanding increased while misunderstanding decreased [17]. This means that play-based pedagogy not only supports immediate vocabulary gain, but also supports a more comprehensive understanding of lexical content. One of the most valuable aspects of Naderi & Moafian's study is that it tested both post-test and delayed post-test simultaneously, and students in the non-digital group had a better performance on both [16]. This implies that the benefits of acquiring vocabulary through play should not be evaluated in only one single test, but also in terms of retention. Finally, Li et al. remind that playful

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.33846

activities do not necessarily lead to statistically superior short-term test scores, but as both groups improve and the playful group is more proactive in qualitative perception [15]. This suggests that play-based vocabulary instruction may not necessarily result in an instantaneous increase in scores, but rather in a qualitatively different approach to learning.

3.2. Variations across different forms of playful instruction

Firstly, when compared playful pedagogical activities with traditional review, drill, and recitation methods, play does not always yield significantly higher short-term test scores, but it often changes the quality of the learning process in important ways. As mentioned above, Li et al. found that both methods can improve vocabulary learning, but the post-test between-group difference is not significant [15]. Researchers also emphasised the qualitative advantages of play-based learning activities, including that they are interactive, enjoyable tasks, and that students are active participants, players, and creators. And also successful implementation requires four carefully designed processes: planning, orientation, playing, and elaboration. Especially during the interview process, students mentioned that this play-based approach, which they found very attractive during the planning stage, allowed them to form groups and brainstorm together to carry out activities. Other young learners also expressed that they enjoy the playing stage because it encourages active communication and collaboration, which leads to relaxation and confidence. This indicates that the advantages of a play-based approach may not necessarily be reflected first in short-term test scores, but rather in the overall quality of the classroom atmosphere, participation methods, and learning experience. This also indicates that if current studies only look at a single pre-post vocabulary score, it may underestimate the educational value of playful pedagogy.

Secondly, playful instruction is not a single method. Rather, the category of play-based instruction is diversified internally, and different playful forms support vocabulary learning through different routes and limitations. Naderi and Moafian's study clearly demonstrates that non-digital groups outperform digital groups in both post test and delayed post test scenarios [16]. Additionally, interviews with teachers, parents, students, and observers repeatedly mention that non-digital formats bring more class involvement, cooperation, discussion, and sustained emotions. While digital formats, although initially fun, are more individualised and easier to later boredom. This result indicates that collaborative non-digital format of play-based instructions can outperform individual digital ones. However, Chowdhury et al. suggest that digital formats may also be effective. They studied a different digital form, where students do not play ready-made games, but rather make games themselves [17]. Under these conditions, digital media is no longer just individual screen interaction, but is tied to generation, agency, making, and contextualised learning, resulting in significant vocabulary gains for young learners. Therefore, the key contrast here is not simply digital versus non-digital, but rather the differences in social interaction (socially shared/individually isolated), learner agency, and task design (generative/consumptive) that matter more.

3.3. Mechanisms for vocabulary gains

From the perspective of learners, different play-based learning approaches have a certain positive impact on additional language learning because they modify the way children encounter, process, and memorise words. Chowdhury et al. outlined a variety of interconnected mechanisms, including generation, agency, tinkering, intrinsic motivation, and contextualised learning, that result in an enjoyable and powerful additional language-learning process for young learners, which helps

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.33846

explain why some playful environments can promote vocabulary development [17]. Meanwhile, Chowdhury et al. also mentioned that successful language learning relies on repeated exposure and multimodal interaction to establish new vocabulary meanings and forms [17]. Sustained instructions on the discussion of newly learned target words and opportunities to understand those words in context are also essential during this process [18]. Naderi and Moafian added that when children participate in enjoyable activities that stimulate interest and require reflection on word meanings, they tend to develop a deeper understanding of target vocabulary, thereby improving retention and recall [16]. They also emphasised the role of stress-free, meaningful environments in the quality of language learning, and the use of play-based pedagogy assists teachers in creating such learning environments. Therefore, play-based learning promotes vocabulary development in additional languages not just by playfulness alone, but because it organises more favourable cognitive, emotional, and contextual conditions.

Merely focusing on the mechanisms from learner's side is not enough, teacher's pedagogical mediation in pay-based learning is also important. Pyle et al. explicitly state that the core issue in implementing teacher-facilitated play is how to strike a balance between child autonomy and explicit academic goals [19]. They described play-based learning as a continuum, and placed guided play in the middle of this continuum, explaining that teachers can first create a playful scenario to demonstrate the literacy behaviours of the target language, then gradually step back, and when necessary, enter the learner's play process again to refocus the learning goals [19, 20]. In the experiment conducted by Li et al., they used a four-stage model of planning, orientation, playing, and elaboration, which underscores the need for a carefully designed strategy to guide learners in play-based vocabulary teaching [15]. Lastly, through reflection and elaboration, reconnect learners' playful experiences with lexical learning in an additional language [15]. Effective play-based vocabulary learning is therefore best characterised as purposefully structured, teacher-scaffolded engagement rather than unguided, freely exploratory activity [19]. Taken together, these studies suggest that vocabulary development is strongest when play is purposeful, language-rich, socially interactive, and carefully scaffolded by teachers.

4. Play-based learning and classroom engagement

4.1. Evidence for enhanced engagement

The overall literature demonstrated a more consistent benefit of play-based learning on classroom engagement, even when students' academic gains are sometimes mixed across studies. This point is valid because if see playful learning in a broader framework, playful pedagogy was intentionally designed as a learning environment that is easier to engage students. Nesbitt et al. explicitly stated in their paper that when activities are meaningful, socially interactive, iterative, and enjoyable, students' learning state is at its best, and guided play is one of the core forms of incorporating these principles into the classroom [21]. They further explained that guided play is not simply about allowing learners to play freely, rather a form of student-led but teacher-facilitated learning. In other words, one of its major goals is to truly engage students in the learning process, rather than just letting them passively receive it. Therefore, besides from illustrating that play-based learning can enhance engagement, the focus of this section is to further clarify what kind of engagement is improved, through what mechanisms, and under what conditions.

Next, a closer look at how and what part of engagement is enhanced in practice. The research results of Zhang et al. on digital game-based vocabulary learning (DGBVL) show that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students exhibit overall active engagement across behavioural, cognitive,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.33846

and emotional dimensions, and this engagement has a statistically significant positive impact on students' vocabulary development [13]. That is to say, the engagement promoted by play-based learning is a multidimensional engagement pattern that can be operationalised and measured, and is directly related to learning outcomes. It is a continuous process from attention to cognitive investment and emotional experience. Furthermore, Blinkoff et al. also emphasise that high-quality learning experiences should support students' academic, cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development, and play-based learning is exactly achieved through meaningful, socially interactive, iterative, and enjoyable engaged learning, rather than just focusing on students' on-task behaviour in the classroom [22]. Nevertheless, Zhang et al. also remind that deep engagement in digital game-based learning does not automatically equate to more effective learning outcomes [13]. They also raised concerns that the longer screen use time required by DGBVL may potentially increase the risk of attention-deficit disorder and poor academic performance, leading to a decrease in learning efficiency instead of an increase [23, 24]. As a result, the next section will discuss which dimensions of engagement are genuinely productive.

4.2. Engagement as a multidimensional construct

In early additional language classrooms, simplifying engagement to surface-level indicators—such as children appearing excited or remaining on-task—inevitably underestimates the true complexity and educational significance of play-based learning, so engagement needs to be understood as a multidimensional construct. As mentioned above, Zhang et al. have already provided a clear three-dimensional model of engagement [13]. Transforming these three dimensions into KS1 additional language learning settings, behavioural engagement refers to the extent to which students are willing to participate in activities, how long they can stay with the task, and their physical involvement in target-language routines. Cognitive engagement refers to students' attention to target words, inferring and recalling meanings and expressions, and using different cognitive strategies to complete tasks. Lastly, emotional engagement can be reflected in students' level of enjoyment through participation, their curiosity and confidence, and whether they believe the participation is worthwhile. These three are related, but not equivalent. Because according to Zhang et al.'s findings, cognitive engagement has a direct impact on vocabulary knowledge, while behavioural and emotional engagement are more likely to have an indirect effect through cognitive engagement [13]. This shows that students' learning may benefit most directly via cognitive engagement. Although it was drawn in the DGBVL scenario, it reminds that while play-based learning can have an overall positive impact on classroom engagement, not all engagements have the same learning value.

In early language classrooms, engagement is often misinterpreted as compliance or busyness. Waddington demonstrated in a small-scale qualitative research that in early foreign language education, if play is used as a tool to achieve predetermined curricular aims, or if the classroom is filled by teacher-centred practice, target-language-only policies, and only seemly to be fun, children's opportunities for truly engaging agencies tend to be compressed, leaving little opportunity for learners to shape their learning space according to their own interests [9]. From this, it can be seen that the so-called engagement sometimes only involves students imitating teachers, repeating target projects, or appearing busy. Such a classroom may appear orderly and energetic, but it may not necessarily reflect true cognitive engagement and child agency. That said, Nesbitt et al. added that guided play is not about not having a teacher goal, but about finding a balance between learning goals, child agency, and adult guidance [21]. In guided play, learners' interests play the leading role, and they have the agency rather than achieving results only in the way prescribed by adults. The issue, therefore, is not whether adults should be involved in play-based learning, but

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.33846

rather how that involvement is structured: when child agency is actively supported rather than replaced by compliance, engagement becomes more educationally meaningful.

4.3. Mechanisms and results in different conditions

Playful learning enhances engagement because it changes the design of the learning environment. Nesbitt et al. describe that students learn the most when classroom condition is active, meaningful, socially interactive, iterative, and enjoyable [21]. Specifically, active refers to minds-on, which students can gain transferable and deeper learning via an active inquiry process. Meaningful refers to the ability of students to connect newly learned knowledge with prior experience and cultural background. Simultaneously engage in socially interactive learning from and with others. Lastly, student engagement is supported by teacher modelling, active learning opportunities, positive feedback, and the right amount of challenge and support. In such an ideal classroom environment, students' engagement is the highest, which means they can have higher attention, longer persistence, and deeper involvement. Furthermore, Blinkoff et al. added that one of the distinctive contributions of play-based learning lies in its capacity to activate learners' interest, which may function as a motivational mediator between the features of the learning environment—such as its playful and interactive design—and students' language learning outcomes [22]. They point out that interest is a mental state related to specific content and triggered by learner-environment interaction. The active and playful learning characteristics provided by play-based learning can trigger this interest, which ultimately supports students' language learning outcomes. Therefore, the engagement value of play-based learning is not accidental, but rather a series of positive effects brought by the aforementioned mechanisms.

At the same time, research shows that classroom engagement brought by play-based learning is not always productive, if there is not an appropriate task design and teacher scaffolding, learners' visible enthusiasm may stay superficial or even become cognitively counterproductive. As mentioned in the results of Zhang et al.'s study above, cognitive engagement has a direct positive impact on vocabulary knowledge, while behavioural and emotional engagement have more indirect effects through cognitive engagement [13]. Nevertheless, on the contrary, excessive and prolonged behavioural engagement may consume learners' limited attention and mental resources, leading to weakened emotional and cognitive engagement instead of benefiting from it. From this, it can be concluded that simply increasing the intensity of learners' participation is not enough, it also requires maintaining cognitive sustainability. The study by Pyle et al. illustrated the practical challenge of teacher-facilitated play-based learning, which is how to maintain a balance between child autonomy and explicit academic outcomes [19]. They see guided play as a continuum and pointed out that adults can either pre-design the play context or observe children's ongoing play and extend learning through commenting, questioning, and encouraging. In other words, a good engagement is not about the teacher completely letting go or controlling every learning aspect, but about the teacher being able to strategically step in, step back, and re-focus the learning goal. When considered together, that evidence indicates that play-based learning works the most effectively for classroom engagement when it is purposeful, led by child agency, socially interactive, and carefully scaffolded by teachers, instead of just simply entertaining or only highly stimulating.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.33846

5. Discussion and suggestions

5.1. Overall synthesis of the literature

Overall, the literature suggests that play-based learning is especially promising for enhancing classroom engagement and can also support vocabulary development, but vocabulary gains are more mixed and seem to be highly dependent on implementation quality. Specifically, Li et al. found that both playful pedagogical activities and traditional methods can promote vocabulary learning, but playful activities are considered more interactive, adaptable, and can facilitate peer communication and collaboration [15]. Meanwhile, Naderi & Moafian and Chowdhury et al. jointly demonstrate that play-based learning can indeed support vocabulary learning, but their effectiveness varies depending on the task format [16, 17]. Some non-digital, collaborative forms are stronger in learning and retention, while some digital forms are equally effective under child agency, contextualised learning, and generative engagement conditions. For classroom engagement, Zhang et al.'s study demonstrates that the enhanced engagement is often more stable than the improvement in standard academic results, as engagement itself can be activated in three dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional, and cognitive engagement is directly linked to vocabulary knowledge [13]. Especially when the learning environment exhibits high-quality features such as active, meaningful, socially interactive, iterative, and enjoyable [21].

A more thorough review of the evidence further indicates the effectiveness of play-based learning depends less on the mere presence of play and more on the quality of the pedagogical environment —including the degree to which learning goals, child agency, teacher scaffolding, and language-rich interaction are purposefully integrated. Skene et al.'s review states that play-based learning is promising but not uniformly superior. What truly matters is not only the form that children are playing, but how learning goals, child agency, and flexible adult guidance are combined in practice [6]. Li and Kangas emphasised that the quality of play-based learning highly depends on the teachers' pedagogical activities in the four stages of planning, orientation, playing, and elaboration [5]. They also acknowledged at the end of their review that there is still limited high-quality evidence on the role of teachers. Pyle et al.'s study, which is closer to the classroom setting, also suggests that the key to teacher-facilitated guided play lies in balancing child autonomy and explicit academic goals, thereby demonstrating that growing awareness of teacher roles is essential [19]. Finally, Waddington's research suggests that if play-based language teaching ultimately slides towards teacher-centred, target-language-only, pre-determined fun, then even a seemingly active classroom may not truly support child agency and meaningful participation [9]. From this, it can be concluded that the most effective play-based learning is not just about fun, but purposeful, language-rich, responsive to children, and carefully scaffolded.

5.2. Pedagogical implications for KS1 practice

For KS1 practice, this essay based on the exploration of previous research believes that it should not only increase the amount of fun activities, it should not only increase the total amount of interesting activities, but also deliberately use guidance and language-rich play-based teaching methods, combining clear goals with learners' interactive reactions. The four teaching process stages proposed by Li et al. are suitable and practical in transforming them into advice for KS1 classrooms. In planning stage, teachers should clarify the target vocabulary, task objectives, and materials [15]. In orientation stage, it is important to clearly explain the task rules and participation methods. During the playing stage, the use of additional language can be supported through modelling, prompting,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.33846

and peer collaboration. In the final elaboration stage, teachers could re-enter the playing process and reconnect the playful experience back to the learning goals, such as through reflection and re-use of key words. Especially in Li et al.'s study, it was mentioned that students said sometimes they were unclear about the rules, the discussions are too noisy, and the need for more teacher help in playful activities, which precisely illustrates that orientation and onboarding guidance cannot be omitted [15]. Thieme et al. also clearly pointed out in their review that games, routines, scaffolding techniques, peer interaction, flexible language use, and meaningful input activities are all important program-related factors that support young learners' additional language development and their classroom engagement [4]. Therefore, these strategies can support engagement and create more beneficial conditions for vocabulary development.

5.3. Limitations of existing research and future directions

The existing study of play-based learning on the vocabulary development and classroom engagement of young learners is promising, but there are still some research limitations. Most studies have methodological weaknesses and relatively high heterogeneity. Skene et al. clearly pointed out in their review that most studies included are quite small in sample sizes, high heterogeneity in moderator analyses, scarce follow-up data, and significant differences in the implementation of play-based pedagogy across different studies under different conditions [6]. Li and Kangas also acknowledge that there is limited evidence in their research focusing on the teacher role, and both search and interpretation may be limited by the scope of materials and the conceptual vagueness of terminology in this field [5]. For empirical studies, Li et al. only involved a four-week intervention with two classes, and the small sample size and test design limited the generalizability of the results [15]. Thus, these studies demonstrate that current evidence is generally promising, but still subject to limited to sample sizes, short interventions, inconsistent definitions, and context-specific implementations.

Future research should prioritise classroom-based, longitudinal studies situated specifically within KS1 contexts. Given that the majority of existing studies do not extend beyond the immediate post-test, investigations tracking vocabulary retention and engagement quality over periods of at least one academic term—or ideally longer—would substantially strengthen the evidence base [6]. Thieme et al. and Li et al. also stated that most of the research in this field is exploratory, so they call for a larger and more diverse sample to conduct long-term follow-up studies and longer interventions targeting primary school students [4, 15]. Secondly, a clearer conceptual understanding and comparative design are needed. Skene et al. have demonstrated that different gradients of guided play may be applicable to different outcomes, while Pyle et al. have also reinterpreted guided play as a continuum [6, 20]. So since then, future research is particularly worth comparing free play vs guided play vs teacher-directed play, digital vs non-digital, different levels of teacher scaffolding and so on to help students establish a more favourable environment for their additional language learning. Finally, outcome measurements are needed. As mentioned earlier in this essay, it is easy to underestimate the value of play-based learning by only looking at a single post-test score. So in the future, researchers should also pay attention to measuring vocabulary acquisition, retention, expressive knowledge, as well as behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement simultaneously to obtain more diverse data, in order to better investigate how play-based learning affects vocabulary development and engagement.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.33846

6. Conclusion

This essay discussed how play-based learning affects classroom engagement and vocabulary development of children when learning additional languages in early stages. Previous evidence has shown that play-based learning can effectively enhance classroom engagement, particularly in terms of participation in academic activities, enjoyment, and sustained involvement. It can also support vocabulary development, although these gains appear less uniform and depend more heavily on the design and implementation. These benefits appear to be strongest when play is purposeful, language-rich, socially interactive, and supported by appropriate teacher scaffolding while still preserving child agency. This highlights the need for responsive, guided play-based pedagogy in KS1 classrooms. In the end, investigating play-based learning is essential because it helps rethink early additional language learning as a question of how meaningful, responsive, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy can support both learning and participation rather than as a choice between play and instruction.

References

[1] N.F. Ramírez, P.K. Kuhl, Early second language learning through sparklingTM: scaling up a language intervention in infant education centers. Mind Brain Educ. 14, 94–103 (2020). https: //doi.org/10.1111/mbe.12232
[2] F. Myles, Learning foreign languages in primary schools: is younger better? Lang. Soc. Policy (2017). https: //doi.org/10.17863/CAM.9806
[3] K. Bergström, M. Klatte, C. Steinbrink, T. Lachmann, First and second language acquisition in German children attending a kindergarten immersion program: a combined longitudinal and cross-sectional study. Lang. Learn. 66, 386–418 (2016). https: //doi.org/10.1111/lang.12162
[4] A.-M.M. Thieme, K. Hanekamp, S. Andringa, J. Verhagen, F. Kuiken, The effects of foreign language programmes in early childhood education and care: a systematic review. Lang. Cult. Curric. 35, 334–351 (2022). https: //doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2021.1984498
[5] X. Li, M. Kangas, A systematic literature review of playful learning in primary education: teachers' pedagogical activities. Educ. 3-13 (2024). https: //doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2416954
[6] K. Skene, C.M. O'Farrelly, E.M. Byrne, N. Kirby, E.C. Stevens, P.G. Ramchandani, Can guidance during play enhance children's learning and development in educational contexts? A systematic review and meta-analysis. Child Dev. 93, 1162–1180 (2022). https: //doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13730
[7] K. Hirsh-Pasek, J.M. Zosh, R.M. Golinkoff, J.H. Gray, M.B. Robb, J. Kaufman, Putting education in "educational" apps: lessons from the science of learning. Psychol. Sci. Public Interest 16, 3–34 (2015). https: //doi.org/10.1177/1529100615569721
[8] A. Johnstone, An inquiry into teachers' implementation of play-based learning aligned approaches within senior primary classes. Kairaranga 23, 17–34 (2022). https: //doi.org/10.54322/kairaranga.v23i1.331
[9] J. Waddington, Early foreign language education: play as a site for child agency. J. Multiling. Multicult. Dev. (2023). https: //doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2023.2290095
[10] E. Wood, The play-pedagogy interface in contemporary debates, in The SAGE Handbook of Play and Learning in Early Childhood, ed. by L. Brooker, M. Blaise, S. Edwards (SAGE, London, 2014), pp. 145–156
[11] M.A. Heidari-Shahreza, Pedagogy of play: insights from playful learning for language learning. Discov. Educ. 3, 157 (2024). https: //doi.org/10.1007/s44217-024-00250-3
[12] A.M.-L. Svalberg, Engagement with language: interrogating a construct. Lang. Aware. 18, 242–258 (2009). https: //doi.org/10.1080/09658410903197264
[13] R. Zhang, D. Zou, G. Cheng, Learner engagement in digital game-based vocabulary learning and its effects on EFL vocabulary development. System 119, 103173 (2023). https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2023.103173
[14] E. James, N.K. Currie, S.X. Tong, K. Cain, The relations between morphological awareness and reading comprehension in beginner readers to young adolescents. J. Res. Read. 44 (2020). https: //doi.org/10.1111/1467-9817.12316
[15] X. Li, M. Kangas, J. Zhang, Comparing the effects of playful pedagogical activities and traditional methods on EFL vocabulary learning. Int. J. Game-Based Learn. 15, 1–16 (2025). https: //doi.org/10.4018/ijgbl.389046

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.33846

[16] S. Naderi, F. Moafian, The victory of a non-digital game over a digital one in vocabulary learning. Comput. Educ. Open 4, 100135 (2023). https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.caeo.2023.100135
[17] M. Chowdhury, L.Q. Dixon, L.-J. Kuo, J.P. Donaldson, Z.R. Eslami, R. Viruru, W. Luo, Digital game-based language learning for vocabulary development. Comput. Educ. Open 6, 100160 (2024). https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.caeo.2024.100160
[18] S. Moody, X. Hu, L.-J. Kuo, M. Jouhar, Z. Xu, S. Lee, Vocabulary instruction: a critical analysis of theories, research, and practice. Educ. Sci. 8, 180 (2018). https: //doi.org/10.3390/educsci8040180
[19] A. Pyle, H. Wickstrom, O. Gross, E. Kraszewski, Supporting literacy development in kindergarten through teacher-facilitated play. J. Early Child. Res. 22, 428–441 (2024). https: //doi.org/10.1177/1476718X231221363
[20] A. Pyle, E. Danniels, A continuum of play-based learning: the role of the teacher in play-based pedagogy and the fear of hijacking play. Early Educ. Dev. 28, 274–289 (2017). https: //doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1220771
[21] K.T. Nesbitt, K. Hirsh-Pasek, R.M. Golinkoff, E. Blinkoff, Making schools work: an equation for active playful learning. Theory Pract. 62, 141–154 (2023). https: //doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2023.2202136
[22] E. Blinkoff, K.T. Nesbitt, R.M. Golinkoff, K. Hirsh-Pasek, Investigating the contributions of active, playful learning to student interest and educational outcomes. Acta Psychol. 238, 103983 (2023). https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2023.103983
[23] C.K. Ra, J. Cho, M.D. Stone, J. De La Cerda, N.I. Goldenson, E. Moroney, I. Tung, S.S. Lee, A.M. Leventhal, Association of digital media use with subsequent symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder among adolescents. JAMA 320, 255–263 (2018). https: //doi.org/10.1001/jama.2018.8931
[24] A.W. Kates, H. Wu, C.L.S. Coryn, The effects of mobile phone use on academic performance: a meta-analysis. Comput. Educ. 127, 107–112 (2018). https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2018.08.012