

THE POWER OF PLAY: PLAY ACTIVITIES AS AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY TO IMPROVE EARLY CHILDHOOD ENGLISH SKILLS

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Abstract

This study explores the role of play-based activities in improving English language skills among early childhood learners in the digital era, where children are increasingly exposed to passive learning through screens. The objective of this research is to analyze how structured play activities can enhance vocabulary, speaking, and listening skills in early childhood education. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach involving 12 preschool children in one class over a period of 1–2 months. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing techniques. The findings indicate that play-based learning activities such as singing, role play, and interactive games significantly improve children's English abilities, particularly in listening and vocabulary, while speaking skills show gradual development. The learning environment also became more engaging, increasing children's participation, motivation, and confidence. The significance of this study lies in demonstrating that play-based learning provides a meaningful, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate approach for language acquisition. In conclusion, integrating play into English learning effectively supports both linguistic and social development in early childhood.

Keywords: play-based learning, English skills, early childhood, vocabulary, speaking

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji peran aktivitas bermain dalam meningkatkan kemampuan bahasa Inggris anak usia dini di era digital, di mana anak cenderung terpapar pembelajaran pasif berbasis layar. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis bagaimana aktivitas bermain yang terstruktur dapat meningkatkan kemampuan kosakata, berbicara, dan pemahaman bahasa Inggris anak. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan subjek 12 anak PAUD dalam satu kelas selama 1–2 bulan. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis melalui reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa aktivitas bermain seperti bernyanyi, bermain peran, dan permainan interaktif mampu meningkatkan

kemampuan bahasa Inggris anak, terutama pada aspek listening dan vocabulary, sementara kemampuan speaking berkembang secara bertahap. Selain itu, suasana belajar menjadi lebih menyenangkan sehingga meningkatkan partisipasi, motivasi, dan kepercayaan diri anak. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran berbasis bermain merupakan pendekatan yang efektif, kontekstual, dan sesuai dengan perkembangan anak

Keywords: aktivitas bermain, bahasa Inggris, anak usia dini, kosakata, berbicara

INTRODUCTION

In today's era of globalization and digitalization, English language skills are one of the important competencies that need to be introduced from an early age (Anggraini, 2017)(Agus Rustamana et al., 2024). English not only serves as a tool of international communication, but also as a bridge to access various sources of knowledge, technology, and global information (Damanaik, 2023)(Nisa et al., 2025). Therefore, early childhood education (PAUD) has a strategic role in laying the foundation of English language skills through an approach that is in accordance with the characteristics of children's development (Fitri et al., 2025). At this stage, children are in a very rapid phase of language development, so the right stimulation will have a significant impact on language skills in the future (Surono et al., 2022)

However, the reality on the ground shows that English language learning in PAUD still faces various challenges (Haris et al., 2025). Many institutions still apply conventional methods, such as vocabulary memorization, word repetition (*Drilling*), and the use of worksheets, which are not in accordance with the principles of early childhood learning. This approach tends to place the child as a passive recipient (Fatmawati et al., 2023), thus reducing their opportunities to explore and use language naturally (Scott, 2025). As a result, children often experience boredom, lack of motivation, and difficulty in understanding and using English in meaningful contexts(Dahlan, 2024).

In fact, theoretically, early childhood learns most effectively through play activities (Susanti et al., 2025). Play is a children's world that allows them to learn naturally, actively, and funly. Through play, children can develop various aspects of development simultaneously, including language, social, emotional, and cognitive aspects (Achmad et al., 2025) Play activities provide opportunities for children to interact, imitate, explore, and construct meanings, so it is very relevant to be used as an approach in learning English. In this context, language is not taught formally, but rather is acquired indirectly through contextual play experiences (Fitri et al., 2025).

A number of previous studies have revealed that educational games can improve children's vocabulary mastery and communication skills. For example, Hidayati's (2019) research shows that the use of image- and motion-based games can help children remember English vocabulary better. Meanwhile, Rahmawati and Suryani (2021) found that group-based interactive games are able to improve children's speaking skills and courage in using language. The findings show that play has great potential in supporting language learning (Rahmawati et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, most research still positions games as a supporting medium, rather than as the primary approach in learning. In addition, studies that systematically integrate play activities to develop various aspects of English language skills—such as listening, speaking, and vocabulary—are still relatively limited. Previous research also tends to not comprehensively describe how the process of implementing play activities can create a communicative, interactive, and meaningful learning environment for early childhood. This gap shows the need for more in-depth research on the role of play activities as a complete learning strategy in improving the English language skills of early childhood education children (Raihanah, 2023).

In addition, in the context of the current digital era, children are increasingly exposed to screen-based media that tends to be passive. This condition has the potential to reduce direct verbal interaction that is needed in language development (Mulyaningtias et al., 2025) (Kiki Firda Auliyah, 2025). Therefore, a learning approach is needed that is able to compensate for these conditions by presenting an active, interactive, and two-way learning experience. Play activities are a relevant alternative because they are able to provide a concrete learning experience, involve social interaction, and encourage children to use language naturally in fun situations (Sutra et al., 2025).

Based on this description, this study focuses on the study of the role of play activities in improving early childhood English skills. This study not only looked at the final results in the form of improving language skills, but also examined the learning process that occurred, the form of play activities used, and the child's response during the activity. Thus, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of how play activities can be optimized as an approach to learning English in early childhood education.

Furthermore, the results of this research are expected to contribute to the development of learning practices that are more innovative, fun, and in accordance with the needs of children's development. In addition, this research is also expected to be a reference for PAUD educators in designing English learning activities that are not only results-oriented, but also on a meaningful and child-centered learning process.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type that aims to describe in depth the phenomenon of English language learning through play activities in early childhood in a natural context (Scott, 2020). This

approach was chosen because it is able to provide a comprehensive understanding of the process, interactions, and meanings that occur during learning activities (Haki et al., 2024b)(Haki et al., 2024a). The research was carried out in one of the PAUD institutions for approximately 1-2 months by adjusting the schedule of learning activities at school. The research subjects consisted of 12 children in one class that were selected purposively, namely based on the consideration of the child's active involvement in learning activities. The object of the research is focused on children's English skills which include aspects of vocabulary, speaking skills, and listening.

The data collection techniques in this study include observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation is carried out directly to observe the play activities used in English learning as well as children's responses and involvement during the activity. Interviews are conducted in a semi-structured manner with teachers to obtain information about learning strategies, obstacles faced, and the development of children's language skills. Meanwhile, documentation is used as supporting data in the form of photos of activities, notes of learning outcomes, and learning media used during the research process. The research instruments used included observation sheets, interview guidelines, and checklists for the development of children's English skills. Observation sheets are used to record children's involvement and language skills development during play activities, while interview guidelines serve as a reference in data mining from informants.

Data analysis was carried out using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994) which includes three stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. Data reduction is done by sorting, focusing, and simplifying data that is relevant to the research objectives. The presentation of data is carried out in the form of narrative descriptions to facilitate understanding of the research findings, while conclusions are drawn

based on the results of data interpretation that has been systematically analyzed. To ensure the validity of the data, this study uses a triangulation technique, which is comparing data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation (Sugiyono, 2017). Thus, the data produced has a level of validity and credibility that can be scientifically accounted for.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 12 PAUD children in one class who participated in English learning based on play activities. Based on the results of observations, interviews, and documentation, it was found that play activities such as singing, role play, and interactive games had a positive impact on children's English skills, especially in the aspects of vocabulary, speaking, and listening.

To strengthen the qualitative findings, the results of child development observations are presented in quantitative form as follows:

Table 1. Recapitulation of Children's English Proficiency Development (n = 12)

Aspects	BB	MB	BSH	BSB
Vocabulary	1	3	6	2
Speaking	2	4	5	1
Listening	1	2	7	2

Description: BB = Not yet developed; MB = Starting to Develop; BSH = Develop as expected; BSB = Very Well Developed

The distribution shows that the majority of children are in the Developing According to Expectations (BSH) category, especially in the aspects of listening and vocabulary. Meanwhile, the speaking aspect shows a more diverse variety of development than the other two aspects.

To clarify the trend of the data, the percentage of developments is presented as follows:

Table 2. Percentage of Child Development

Aspects	BB (%)	MB (%)	BSH (%)	BSB (%)
Vocabulary	8%	25%	50%	17%
Speaking	17%	33%	42%	8%
Listening	8%	17%	58%	17%

This percentage shows the dominance of the BSH category in all aspects, with the highest proportion in listening. This indicates that the ability to understand language develops faster than the ability to produce language.

Furthermore, the analysis of the average score provides an overview of developmental trends as follows:

Table 3. Average English Language Proficiency Development

Aspects	Average Score	Categories
Vocabulary	2,75	Growing Up With Expectations
Speaking	2,42	Start Growing
Listening	2,84	Growing Up With Expectations

The average score showed that the listening aspect had the highest achievement, followed by vocabulary, while speaking was at a relatively lower level. These findings corroborate the observation that children understand language faster than expressing it verbally.

The findings of this study show that play activities have a strong relevance to the characteristics of early childhood learning, especially in the development of English language skills. Play activities provide a contextual,

interactive, and meaningful learning environment, allowing children to acquire language naturally through hands-on experience. This is in line with the view that children learn language through social interaction and active involvement in the learning environment (Fisher et al., 2013).

The dominance of development in the listening aspect shows that receptive skills develop before productive skills. In the context of language learning, comprehension is the main foundation before children are able to speak. Play activities that involve simple instructions, movements, and repetition indirectly strengthen children's understanding of the meaning of language. This finding is in line with the theory of language acquisition which states that meaningful and repeated exposure to language will accelerate the process of comprehension (Sanrock, 2011).

Developments in the vocabulary aspect show that the use of play media such as songs, picture cards, and interactive games is able to enrich children's vocabulary. A fun learning environment makes it easier for children to absorb and remember new words without pressure. This supports the findings of previous research that stated that game-based learning significantly improves vocabulary retention because it involves emotional and hands-on experiences.

Meanwhile, the achievement in the relatively lower aspect of speaking shows that speaking skills require a more complex process. This ability not only depends on vocabulary mastery, but is also influenced by the factors of confidence, courage, and opportunities to practice. The role play activity in this study was proven to provide space for children to start expressing language simply. This is in line with a communicative approach that emphasizes the importance of hands-on practice in the development of speaking skills.

In addition to the language aspect, play activities also show a contribution to non-cognitive development, such as increased children's

activeness, motivation, and confidence. A non-stressful learning environment allows children to explore and participate optimally. In the context of early childhood education, this condition is crucial because effective learning focuses not only on outcomes, but also on fun and meaningful processes.

On the other hand, limiting factors such as differences in children's abilities, media limitations, and learning time show that the implementation of play-based learning requires careful planning. Therefore, the role of teachers as facilitators is very important in designing activities that are adaptive, creative, and in accordance with children's needs. This is in line with research that confirms that the success of early childhood learning is greatly influenced by the competence of teachers in creating a stimulating learning environment.

Overall, the results of this study reinforce that play activities are a relevant and effective approach in early childhood English learning. This approach not only supports gradual language development, but also creates a learning experience that is fun, interactive, and appropriate to the child's developmental characteristics.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research and discussion, it can be concluded that play activities are an effective method in improving the English language skills of Early Childhood Education (PAUD) children. The increase can be seen in the aspects of vocabulary, *speaking* skills, and listening, with most children in the Developing According to Expectations (BSH) category. The *listening aspect* showed the highest achievement, followed by *vocabulary*, while *speaking* still required more intensive and continuous stimulation. Play activities such as singing, role-playing, and interactive games have been proven to be able to create a fun learning atmosphere, increase activeness, and build children's confidence in using English. These findings confirm that play-based learning is

in line with the characteristics of early childhood who learn through direct experience (*learning by doing*).

Based on these findings, several suggestions can be proposed. For future researchers, it is recommended to develop research with a wider scope, both in terms of the number of subjects and the variety of playing methods, as well as integrate quantitative approaches to strengthen the research results. For education practitioners, especially PAUD teachers, it is recommended to optimize the use of play activities as the main approach in English learning by utilizing creative and contextual media. In addition, teachers need to provide more opportunities for children to practice speaking so that *speaking skills* can develop optimally. For policy makers, the results of this research can be the basis for formulating English learning policies in early childhood education that emphasize a fun, interactive, and appropriate approach to children's development, as well as supporting the provision of facilities and training for teachers in their implementation.

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