The effectiveness of play method in ESL learning among preschoolers in Malaysia

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Abstract: This research aims to explore the role of the play method in enhancing Malaysian preschoolers' English learning in ESL classrooms. This study employed a quasi-experimental design, using both quantitative and qualitative data to determine the effectiveness of integrating the play method in teaching verbs among preschoolers. The sample consisted of 10 preschoolers (K2) aged 6 years, five teachers, and four parents to examine their perspectives on play-based learning. A pre-test, post-test, and semi-structured interview questions were used as instruments to collect data. The parents and teachers were interviewed by the researchers to examine their perspectives on play-based learning. Prior to the intervention, the preschoolers were given a pre-test to gauge their understanding of verbs. Following that, the children were taught verbs using the play method over three weeks. After the intervention, the children were given a post-test to ascertain the effectiveness of the play method in improving their scores in learning verbs. The results indicate that the play method enhanced preschoolers' scores in mastery of verbs. In addition, the findings have valuable implications that may contribute to early childhood educators, parents, or caregivers on integrating the play method in ESL classrooms more effectively.

Keywords: English as second language (ESL), Learning verbs, Parents' views, Play method, Preschool education, Teachers' views.

1. Introduction

Learning at the preschool level often demonstrates unique challenges, especially when it involves ESL learning. The competency to interpret and comprehend messages – receptive skills (listening and reading), conveying and generating information effectively – productive skills (speaking and writing) are all crucial skills for preschoolers to be developed at a young age. According to [1] it is fundamental that appropriate approaches and methodologies are employed for preschoolers' L2 acquisition according to their cognitive developmental stages. Moreover, Klimova [2] mentioned that being able to foster a supportive and engaging environment to facilitate preschoolers' L2 acquisition becomes an additional challenge.

To address these challenges, this research aims to discover various teaching methods that can be incorporated into preschool education to enhance preschoolers' L2 acquisition. Play as a natural behaviour for preschoolers has been broadly recognized as a valuable pedagogical tool in preschool education and it has gained compelling attention among educators and researchers due to its effectiveness in fostering engagement of preschoolers which improves their learning outcomes [3].

The impact of play-based learning on cognitive development has been presented in numerous studies. Findings by revealed that preschool children enjoyed hands-on experience playing with colourful pattern blocks (circle, triangle, diamond, star, and heart shape) to generate patterns. The children enjoyed playing with blocks of shapes which enhanced their understanding of shapes and

pattern generating. Therefore, this research aims to discover how play can be implemented as a teaching strategy to support preschoolers' ESL learning, focusing on the role play method to enhance both receptive and productive skills. Findings from this research may contribute to educators and researchers on the implications of play-based learning in an ESL classroom.

1.1. Research Problem

English plays an essential role in bridging the communication across diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To have the ability to communicate effectively, proficiency in English extends beyond the basic conversational skills to grammar accuracy and fluency through various activities [4]. Additionally, listening skills are equally vital, as communication is a reciprocal process that involves both comprehension and expression.

With the rapid advancement of globalization and education, the age at which children begin acquiring language skills has significantly shifted. Unlike previous generations, where English was often introduced as a supplementary subject in primary school, contemporary parents recognize the importance of early language exposure [5]. In Malaysia's multilingual context, parents actively encourage their children to develop proficiency in English, Malay, and Mandarin from an early age, fostering holistic language development. However, introducing ESL in preschool settings presents unique pedagogical challenges. Young learners require engaging, developmentally appropriate approaches to sustain their interest and facilitate language acquisition [6]. Given the increasing emphasis on early language learning, educators and parents seek innovative methods to enhance preschoolers' engagement in ESL learning. Play-based learning has emerged as an effective approach in early childhood education, leveraging children's natural curiosity and enthusiasm for play to support language development.

1.2. Research Objectives

Play is an essential aspect of early childhood development, as young children are naturally drawn to engaging, hands-on, and sensorial experiences. The early years represent a critical period for cognitive, social, and linguistic development, during which children rapidly acquire knowledge and skills. Recognizing this, contemporary parents place significant emphasis on their children's early education, seeking effective strategies to optimize their learning experiences. Given that preschoolers learn best through play, incorporating play-based learning into language instruction can provide meaningful opportunities for language acquisition and mastery. Therefore, this research aims to discover the impact of play-based on preschoolers' L2 acquisition in an ESL classroom and investigate the perspectives of educators and parents in facilitating and supporting L2 acquisition of preschoolers through play-based approach.

1.3. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:
   i.   How does the integration of play influence language development in a preschool ESL classroom?
   ii. What are the roles of teachers and parents in enhancing language acquisition through play-based learning?

This study holds significant implications for early childhood education, particularly in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) learning among preschoolers in Malaysia. By examining the role of play-based learning in facilitating language acquisition, this research contributes valuable insights to educators, parents or caregivers, policymakers and researchers.

In addition, this research seeks to discover the challenges educators may encounter to offer solutions to support more effective classroom practices in an ESL classroom [7]. Beyond the classroom, parents and caregivers play an essential role to reinforce preschoolers' ESL learning at home. This

research may advocate for the awareness among parents and caregivers about the benefits of play-based learning to support their children's ESL learning [8]. Parents and caregivers may be encouraged to adopt some play-based, interactive language activities at home to create a more enjoyable and immersive learning environment for their children [9].

Furthermore, this research may devote to fellow researchers to investigate on the play-based methodologies in an ESL classroom. As this research mainly focus on investigating the effectiveness and perspectives, the future researchers may study on how culturally and linguistic diverse background influence the English learning of preschoolers as Malaysia is a multicultural country with three main languages being spoken by different races.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasizes on the importance of social interaction and culturally mediated activities – such as play in linguistic and cognitive development. Thus, this research is established on Vygotsky's theory. Focus of Vygotsky's theory – Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) demonstrated that play enables preschoolers to engage in activities beyond their current competency with guidance from educators, adults and peers, and their L2 acquisition can be enhanced through scaffolding [10]. To maximize the efficacy of play, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory highlights the need for collaborative support systems between educators, preschoolers, parents and broader sociocultural environments [11]. In a multilingual setting like Malaysia, these frameworks were supported by recent studies. The interconnected relationship between play, L2 acquisition and stakeholders is imperative to understand the effectiveness of play in improving preschoolers' ESL proficiency. According to Saracho [12] play and learning are viewed as an intertwined process as play scaffolds the cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills for preschoolers. Similarly, Yee, et al. [13] systematic review also reinforces on these frameworks that play-based learning aligns with preschoolers' developmental milestones in ESL learning.

2.2. The Role of Play in Early Childhood Language Acquisition

Play as a natural habit for all preschoolers, allowing them to develop their L2 learning through exploring with syntax, vocabulary and communication in such relaxed settings. Play-based learning in an ESL classroom do enhance preschoolers' bilingual proficiency, phonological awareness, and narrative skills by engaging them in a context-rich and meaningful interactions [14]. For instance, preschoolers are being nurtured to improve their expressive language outcomes through play activities such as symbolic play – where they assign roles or creating imaginary scenarios by themselves [12, 15]. Based on Cheruiyot [16] study, by integrating play-based approach in L2 learning significantly enhance preschoolers' early literacy skills – letter cognition and phonological decoding. To provide opportunities for Malaysian preschoolers to practice English in culturally relevant scenarios, play activities like role-playing on "market day" or "family roles" were explored by Adnan and Paranjothi [17]. These methods have been proven to be effective in fostering preschoolers' communication skill when they engage in imaginative scenarios where they have to negotiate the roles and create dialogue. A finding applicable to Malaysia's emphasis on communicative English by Aldhafeeri, et al. [18] underscored those preschools in Kuwait implemented play-based pedagogy, and it increased vocabulary retention by 40% compared to traditional methods. Correspondingly, digital tools such as language apps, interactive whiteboards also align with Malaysia's effort in integrating technology in education. According to a study by Van der Westhuizen and Hannaway [19] digital play in South African classrooms reinforces preschoolers' vocabulary through gamified learning, which a strategy that could be adopted by those Malaysian rural schools who face resource limitations. Nonetheless, barriers such as unequal access to technology and educator readiness must be addressed to ensure preschoolers acquire equitable implementation of technology integration in an ESL classroom [20].

2.3. Types of Play and Their Impact on ESL Learning

Play can be presented in various forms for each contributing uniquely to language development. A combination of educators' direction and child's autonomy – guided play, links creativity and structured instruction. Based on Clark [21] study, guided play in ESL classrooms has been proven its effectiveness for increasing vocabulary acquisition by 25% when educators integrated target words into games. For instance, drama activities allow preschoolers to practice intonation and sentence structure in engaging contexts [22]. Similarly, Goldstein [23] study on dramatic games further support the findings that preschoolers who participated in structured drama sessions displayed boosted confidence in using English. Additionally, activities like free play, which is characterized by child-initiated such as block building or imaginative scenarios, stimulate impromptu language use and creativity. Based on Onyango, et al. [24] case study of Malaysian preschools, preschoolers who engaged in free play displayed higher levels of peer interaction and code-mixing. Similarly, Turkish preschools emphasized that unstructured play stimulate preschoolers' problem-solving skills and peer collaboration which are also imperative for language learning [25]. Besides, Parrott and Cohen [26] affirmed that mixed-age free play in elementary schools help to promote linguistic adaptability as younger preschoolers mimic older peer's language patterns, which this approach could be tailored in Malaysian preschools to support peer-to-peer learning. To promote preschoolers' social language skills – turn-taking and negotiation, collaborative play such as group storytelling, could be adopted in an ESL classroom. Study of Jeong, et al. [27] highlighted that collaborative play in South African and Canadian classrooms strengthened pragmatic competence, an essential component for preschoolers' ESL proficiency. Cekaite and Simonsson [28] further explore this by presenting how guided play in Swedish preschools braced immigrant children's bilingual development through peer scaffolding. Yet, cultural preferences do influence play implementation in ESL classrooms. For instance, Chinese ESL educators often favour a structured, teacher-led play that aligns with exam-oriented curricula [20]. On the other side, Western educators emphasize on child-led exploration activities. Balancing these approaches is imperative to respect each cultural value while supporting linguistic creativity in Malaysian settings.

2.4. Challenges in Implementing Play-Based ESL Strategies

Incorporating play into Malaysian preschools face pedagogical and systemic barriers despite on its benefits. National policies that assert academic readiness often marginalize play, remaining a significant hurdle that constrains the curriculum. According to Clark [21] 60% of educators who are stuck in exam-driven systems find it struggling to justify playtime to parents or administrators. Wood [29] also identified that there is a critical tension between systemic pressures for Malaysia's academic rigour in the education system and the developmental benefits of play. Similarly, findings from a case study by Mohamed Salleh, et al. [20] revealed that educators often face pressure to focus on rote memorization instead of play-based methods due to parental expectations. Rural Malaysian preschools, for instance, often rely on insufficient cost, limiting exposure to language-rich tools which further complicated with the play implementation [24]. Study by Heang, et al. [30] reported that underfunded schools repurpose the materials creatively such as – recycled items for storytelling props. However, the need for institutional support to maintain such efforts are being stressed. Besides, educators' preparedness in implementing play method is another critical issue as most of the educators lack training in implementing play pedagogy. A study in Kenya reported that only 30% of educators feel confident on designing play-based lessons [24] a challenge mirrored in Malaysia's under-resourced training programs. Based on Hamouda [31] study on listening comprehension challenges affirming on how insufficient training for educators can accelerate language anxiety, highlighting the need for professional development. Parental perceptions also play a role in this matter. Some parents view play as frivolous, preferring grammar drills. Wazeer [32] noted that in EFL contexts, parental pressure to prioritize formal instruction often undermines play's role in language teaching and learning. Wu [33] study emphasizes the importance of co-constructed learning between teachers and parents, arguing that aligning home and school play strategies can mitigate resistance. Motseke [34] similarly stressed the

need for parental education programs in rural South Africa to demonstrate play's educational value, a strategy applicable to Malaysia's multilingual communities.

2.5. Educator and Parental Roles in Facilitating Play-Based Language Development

Educators and parents are pivotal in maximizing play's potential. Educators as facilitators must scaffold play by modelling language, asking open-ended questions, and creating inclusive environments. Saracho [12] emphasized that educators who engage in play as "co-players" rather than directors foster richer linguistic interactions. In Malaysia, bilingual teachers can leverage translanguaging during play to affirm children's home languages while introducing English Saracho [12]. Lee and Liu [35] demonstrated how drama-based tasks with authentic audiences, such as parent-teacher performances, enhanced preschoolers' oral presentation skills, suggesting that collaborative projects could bridge school and home learning. Bulotsky-shearer, et al. [36] found that play at home and school synergistically contributes to early literacy, particularly when parents engage in activities like reading interactive e-books or pretend play. Nair, et al. [37] also stressed that preschool parents' home-based involvement has a greater impact on children's academic performance. Yogman, et al. [38] advocate for paediatricians to promote play's role in development, highlighting its power to build executive function skills. These findings supported by Gibb, et al. [39] who linked play-based programs to improved cognitive flexibility in preschoolers. A policy framework was proposed by Parker, et al. [5] for integrating play into curricula, underscoring how stakeholder collaboration can be coordinated to parental expectations with pedagogical goals. Workshops of technology resources such as those proposed by Van der Westhuizen and Hannaway [19] could allow parents to integrate play into daily routines while still appreciating cultural reservations in Malaysia settings.

Play-based learning holds tremendous promise in increasing Malaysian preschooler's ESL proficiency level. Yet, systemic challenges and collaboration between stakeholders still place as a barrier to its success. Global best practices for current studies highlighted on the need for culturally adapted play strategies, educator training and development, and community awareness to bridge with Malaysia's multilingual context. For instance, while Bronfenbrenner [40] study emphasized on the necessity of seeing play and learning as a symbiotic process, Parker, et al. [5] policy framework offered certain actionable steps for institutional reform. Focusing play method as a pedagogical pillar, integrated models of digital and traditional play should be evaluated so that Malaysian preschool settings can nurture a linguistically confident environment and prepare preschoolers to be creative learners in a globalized world.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research employed a quasi-experimental research design (One-group pre-test post-test design) to examine the effectiveness of play method in an ESL classroom. Such research design allows for a comparative analysis of ESL learning outcomes before and after an instructional intervention, which is the most suitable for such educational research in a natural learning environment. Similarly to Gopalan, et al. [41] study, the preschool setting and small sample size safeguarded both practical feasibility and ecological validity by using this research design.

A pre-test and post-test were used to assess preschoolers' scores in learning verbs, before and after the play method was carried out. By observing young children while the teacher was employing the play method, the researchers were able to determine preschoolers' engagement in the lesson and their social interactions. Both quantitative and qualitative data were utilised to provide enriched results on the effectiveness of using the play method. Quantitative data from the pretest and post-tests provided measurable insights into the effectiveness of the play-based method in the ESL classroom. Furthermore, qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews from teachers and parents highlighted their perspectives on enhancing preschoolers' ESL learning through the play method. To ensure a

comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives, thematic analysis was employed to identify the patterns in their responses.

According to Dawadi, et al. [42] quantitative and qualitative data provide opportunities to assure a more holistic understanding of the research problem. Objective evidence of preschoolers' ESL proficiency in using verbs was provided through pre- and post-test results, while the depth of understanding on the play method is supported in both school and home environments was provided by educators and parents through semi-structured interviews. The validity of the findings by cross-verifying results from different data sources has been strengthened through this methodological triangulation. The quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics (percentage), and the qualitative data was analysed using emerging themes.

3.2. Sampling Techniques

Random sampling is not feasible in selecting the preschoolers, because it interrupts the school timetable as such, an intact group or the existing group or class was used for the intervention [43]. Purposive sampling technique was employed for educators and parents to ensure that participants have relevant experiences and insights that can contribute to this research, which is based on their direct involvement with preschoolers' ESL learning. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with five educators who are working as ESL teachers in the preschool and four parents whose children are still enrolled in the preschool. Before conducting the semi-structured interviews, informed consent was obtained, and the researchers reassured participants on the confidentiality of their details and identity.

The participants from purposive sampling were the most applicable in this research because the selected participants had firsthand experiences with preschoolers' language learning. While educators were chosen based on their roles in using the play method in ESL classrooms, parents were selected according to their direct involvement in facilitating their children's ESL learning at home. Selecting individuals with relevant expertise confirmed that the data collected would be meaningful and rich.

3.3. Sampling Size

This research was conducted at an international preschool located in Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia. English serves as the primary medium of instruction, providing an ideal setting for researchers to explore the effectiveness of play-based learning being integrated in an ESL classroom.

As there were only ten K2 children in class X, all students were included in this experimental group (chosen as the intact group) with the consent of their parents. As this study was conducted in Malaysia, the linguistic background of the student participants was varied – 50% from Mandarin-speaking families, 30% from Malay-speaking families, and 20% from Tamil-speaking families. This diversity has added depth to this research, asserting the impacts of integrating play into ESL lessons in such a multilingual environment.

Besides, this research included a small yet diverse group of teachers and parents to provide detailed perspectives. The demographics of interviewed participants are recorded in Table 2. To ensure a wider perspective on the play method integrated in ESL lessons, the researchers included diverse participants. Educators may provide perspectives on teaching methods and teaching strategies, while parents may share their observations on their child's ESL learning outside the classroom setting.

3.4. Ethical Consideration

To ensure the confidentiality and privacy of participants, a range of ethical measures was implemented in compliance with established research ethics. According to Lofland, et al. [44]when working with young children and their families, ethical considerations are crucial to safeguard their rights. A detailed research proposal mapping the research's objectives and procedures was submitted to the preschool principal for agreement in conducting this research prior to data collection [45]. Following approval, the researchers prepared consent letters to distribute to parents and educators, and

those parents whose children are participating in this research and the preschool principal, distributed the consent letters via email to the participants.

Further explanations and assurances about the anonymity of participants' identities were conducted, as some of the parents initially hesitated to provide consent for their children to be involved in this research. However, after the further explanations provided by researchers, participants' parents provided their consent when the researchers assured them that confidentiality was maintained, and any forms of their identities would be omitted from the final analysis. Both educators and parent participants on the semi-structured interviews were all voluntarily agreed to participate in this research. According to British Educational Research Associationm [46] to ensure the security and integrity of collected data, an organised data storage method and handling procedures were employed to adhere to institutional research ethics. For instance, data collected was securely stored in files that are password-protected and access of the files was limited to the primary researchers only to prevent any kind of unauthorized use. Furthermore, findings that were presented in the final report were anonymized to ensure that the responses participants provided could not be traced back to each participant.

Moreover, the right to withdraw without any consequences at any stage was informed to all participants. This was particularly important for parents, as consent regarding their children's participation was respected. No coercion was applied, and participation was entirely voluntary. Given the involvement of young children, the researcher took steps to ensure their well-being. The play-based activities used in the study were designed to align with existing classroom practices, minimising disruptions to children's learning experiences. The lessons incorporated developmentally appropriate play strategies to maintain a fun and engaging environment for children [47].

3.5. Demographic Profile

The 10 participants (preschoolers) are addressed with their initial name, and Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile of pre-test and post-test participants; 50% (n=5) of them speak Mandarin at home, 30% (n=3) of them speak Malay, and 20% (n=2) of them speak Tamil.

Table 1.
Pre-test and post-test Participants' Demographic Profile.

Sample Characteristics	Frequency (n=10)	Percentage
Language used at home		
Mandarin	5	50%
Malay	3	30%
Tamil	2	20%

Table 2.
Parents' and Teachers' Demographic Profile.

Sample Characteristics	Frequency (n=10)	Percentage
Age		
18-30	4	44.4%
31-50	4	44.4%
50 and above	1	11.1%
Gender		
Female	7	87.8%
Male	2	22.2%
Position		
Teacher	5	55.6%
Parents	4	44.4%

Table 2 summarizes the demographic profile of the interview participants in this study. Out of the 9 participants in the study, approximately 44.4% (n=4) were 18-30 years old range and 44.4% were 31-50 years old range, and 11.1% (n=1) was 50 and above years old. As for the gender, 87.8% (n=7) were

female and 22.2% (n=2) were male. Lastly, 55.6% (n=5) of them were teachers and 44.4% (n=4) of them were parents.

4. Findings

The findings of this study are exhibited according to the research questions.

4.1. Research Question 1: "What are the effects of integrating play into a preschool ESL classroom?"

Both pre-test and post-test were executed on ten K2 children to answer the research question 1. A pre-test about verbs was distributed before the lesson, and they went through a three-day lesson about verbs through a teacher-centred method without any play element. Moreover, these participants have prior knowledge of grammatical functions, whereby they were able to identify nouns and correct the usage of singular and plural nouns.

Table 3.
Pre-test Scores.

Language used at home	Frequency (n=10)	
	Above passing rate	Below passing rate
Mandarin	2	3
Malay	1	2
Tamil	0	2
Total	3	7

Note: Total mark=100%
Passing mark=60%

Results in Table 3 show that most of the participants scored below the passing marks of 60% with the total mark of 100% in their pre-test. Based on the result, only 3 participants passed the test, and the other 7 participants did not, which indicates that the passing rate in the pre-test did not meet the average line.

Besides, reading skills are essential to understand the question. Therefore, there were few participants who got lower marks in the pre-test due to their low proficiency level in reading. As mentioned above, to ensure the validity and reliability, informal observation notes were obtained after the pre-test. Along with that, participants' responses were being verbatim quoted as following:

"Why did you choose this answer?"
"Because this is the only word I know from the sentence…" (Learner D)

Based on the response above, it is imperative that participants are required to have well reading skill as they needed it to proceed to the next stage of learning. As Table 1 has shown, there were 3 participants who passed the pre-test, and this was their responses:

"How do you know 'bake' is a verb?"
"My mummy teach me before, she said the thing we do is called a verb." (Learner B)

Based on the response above, it is emphasized that both educators and parents play important role in preschoolers' ESL learning.

After the pre-test was completed, the lessons about verbs were conducted for three weeks using the play method. As play is the nature of children, they tend to enjoy, and their motivation was boosted when fun activities are involved.

Table 4.
Pre-test and Post-test Scores.

Participants	Test Score (100%)		Gain Marks
	Pre-test	Post-test	
Learner H	30	70	40
Learner K	40	90	50
Learner B	80	100	20
Learner A	50	90	40
Learner D	20	70	50
Learner CY	70	100	30
Learner C	40	80	40
Learner E	60	90	30
Learner EM	50	90	40
Learner G	30	90	60

Table 5.
Comparative analysis of pre-test and post-test score by performance categories.

Categories	Pre-test score		Post-test score	
	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Poor (0-30)	3	30	0	0
Average (31-60)	5	50	0	0
Good (61-100)	2	20	10	100
Total	10	100	10	100

A comparison of pre-test and post-test results are exhibited in Table 4. The pre-test consists of 10 questions on the usage of verbs. The post-test also consists of 10 questions, where the difficulty was increased, which contains a maximum of 2 verbs to be identified, compared to pre-test. Findings in Table 4 show that all participants improved in understanding verbs after the execution of the instructional intervention. 4 participants gained 40% marks more than their pre-test, and the highest score was 60%, which one of the participants scored.

"How do you know that the word 'throw' is a verb instead of the word 'rubbish'?"

"I remember from the board game…throw is a verb, because is an action" (Learner G)

After the instructional intervention, it is obvious that participants scored higher marks in their post-test.

4.3. Research Question 2: "What are the roles of teachers and parents in enhancing language development through play?"

Research question 2 was to explore how teachers and parents can be the facilitators on preschoolers' ESL learning using the play method. A semi-structured interview consisting of 4 questions was used to interview five parents and four teachers.

4.3.1. Theme 1: Understanding of Play in Learning

All participants provided their understanding of play-integrated lessons, which showed that educators nowadays have professional knowledge and training in understanding the contemporary teaching method, regardless of their age, along with most of the parents, while one parent demonstrated the opposite understanding.

"Learning through play helps our students develop relevant cognitive skills…in a child-led environment where their interests and curiosity lead the flow of a lesson (Teacher, 31-50 years old)

"For me, play is play. Maybe children can learn something from play." (Parent, 50 years old and above)

4.3.2. Theme 2: The Relationship between Play and Language Learning

Based on the responses, there is a disparity between the age and status of participants' perspectives on integrating the play method in ESL learning. All educators agreed that there is a positive

relationship between play and language learning, most parents have similar views, while only one parent has a different perspective.

"The relationship between play and language learning is that learning takes place in a natural setting…Kids learn through imagination and interaction..." (Parent, 18-30 years old)

"…the learning result might not be effective because children will focus on playing rather than learning language." (Parent, 50 years old and above)

4.3.3. Theme 3: Recommendations for Integrating Play into ESL Learning

Similarly to Theme 2, most of the participants agreed on integrating the play method in ESL learning and would recommend others to use such a method. On the contrary, there is one participant who has the opposite perspective.

"Even when it's solitary play…communication adds purpose to their play." (Teacher, 31-50 years old)

"When my child comes back from school, they can play at home…So why would I send my child to school to play?" (Parent, 50 years old and above)

4.3.4. Theme 4: Parent-teacher Partnership in Play-Integrated Learning

Based on the responses, it showed that both educators and parents valued the importance of home-school partnership and its benefits. Additionally, some participants emphasized the importance of observation.

"Maybe teachers can prepare the play materials then pass it to parents to play together with their kids at home as a follow up activity." (Parent, 31-50 years old)

"…Parents and teachers should have a way to communicate about how the children are doing at school and at home." (Teacher, 31-50 years old)

5. Discussions

5.1. The Effects of Integrating Play into a Preschool ESL classroom

A total of ten K2 children were involved in the data collection took the pre-test before the intervention and the post-test after the intervention. All of them participated enthusiastically during the intervention foe three weeks and showed great improvements in the post-test results. Generally, when play is integrated into an ESL classroom, it makes the learning environment livelier. Board game was included as a medium for participants to consolidate their understanding on verbs [48]. Through fun elements, participants grasped the concept easily during the post-test. Along with the development of their understanding about the grammar, participants' communication skill and higher order thinking skill were enhanced too as researchers observed that participants discussed among themselves on the rules of the board game and negotiated on the frequency they play the board game [49]. Furthermore, participants' higher order thinking skill was enhanced as there was a conflict between them. The participants demonstrated their problem-solving skills when they lost one of the dice and their chess piece [32].

Before the lesson plan being executed, there was only 3 participants who passed the pre-test. After the intervention using the play method, all participants passed the post-test and were able to show their learning outcomes through daily lessons too. For instance, they were able to identify the verbs from sentences while reading and use verbs correctly in making sentences.

5.1.1. Theme 1: Understanding of Play in Learning

Based on the data collected, most of the participants understood the meaning of play in learning. Only one participant sees it differently. Play brings benefits rather than just allowing children to enjoy their time; children's motivation and interest would be aroused when they find the lesson interesting [50]. Play also allow children to practice on their communication skill and higher-order thinking skill, and social skill [51].

5.1.2. Theme 2: The Relationship between Play and Language Learning

Based on the data collected, there is a relationship between play and language learning where children are also able to develop their social skills, especially when they are playing with peers [52]. Both educators and parent participants agreed that play-based learning does bring benefits to their children in an ESL classroom [53]. Play-integrated activities can help to prepare them for the future, to face the real-world situation one day. Through integrating play, children can experience and practice their skills to face real-world situations.

5.1.3. Theme 3: Recommendations for Integrating Play into ESL Learning

According to the data collected, most participants agreed on recommending play into ESL learning, especially in this technology-advanced generation. Children would require an interactive approach as the traditional approach of learning language might not be efficient anymore [54]. Children need to be in a conducive environment with interactive tools as it can cater to different learning styles of children. When children feel bored or uninterested, they might just shut themselves off from learning. Through the integration of technology play method, ESL learners would be more motivated and interested in learning a second language rather than through the conventional method [55].

5.1.4. Theme 4: Parent-teacher Partnership in Play-Integrated Learning

A well-established home-school partnership brings nothing but benefits to children in their development. When a partnership is built between parents and teachers, there is a consistency that provides support for children's learning and minimises children's learning gap between school and home [27]. For instance, parents may work on the activity with their children at home to maintain the consistency of their learning in school. Additionally, sharing the progress of children's language learning at home by parents is important to support children's learning. Similarly, findings by Nair, et al. [37] indicate that parents' home-based involvement in learning can enhance preschoolers' academic performance.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the effectiveness of integrating play method into ESL classroom to enhance ESL learning of preschoolers. The findings stressed that play integration significantly enhances preschoolers' ESL learning along with their engagement and motivation in an ESL classroom [48]. Besides, the results from the post-test showed progress in the participants' competency to identify and use the correct verbs after they were engaged in a play-based instructional intervention. Through informal observations, the researchers noticed that the participants' problem-solving skills, communication skills, and confidence level have improved, which reinforces the pedagogical value of the play method.

Moreover, the perspectives of educators and parents were examined where the responses indicated there is a consensus on the benefits of the play method in ESL learning, while most participants acknowledged the positive benefits. However, some challenges were brought to focus through some responses from parents on the misconceptions about play just purely being recreational rather than educational. Thus, this research affirmed on the importance of home-school partnership, such as the consistency in reinforcing preschoolers' ESL learning to optimize their learning outcomes, which echoes [27] study.

The findings provided valuable insights despite its limitations. This research highlighted the need for continued efforts to incorporate engaging and interactive teaching strategies to cater diverse ESL learning styles of preschoolers. A longer research period may take into consideration for future research. Other than this, a larger sample size, additional data collection methods could be considered too to further validate and expand on the findings.

This research indicates that play serves as a powerful teaching approach to promote preschoolers' ESL learning, as it makes learning enjoyable and meaningful in Malaysia's multilingual setting. As

Malaysia maintains its efforts to focus on bilingual and multilingual education, play-integrated ESL lessons are able to facilitate more effective and holistic learning opportunities for preschoolers, which ultimately prepare them for future academic and social success.

Findings from this research may provide empirical evidence for policymakers to support the incorporation of play-based learning into preschool education ESL curricula. The findings may inform curriculum developers or policymakers on the effectiveness of integrating play method in ESL classrooms as Malaysia continues to emphasize on bilingual and multilingual education [56]. Findings from this research may contribute to shaping educational policies that focus on child-centred and holistic approaches in ESL learning [20].

Despite this contribution, this study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. One of the primary limitations of this study is the constraint of time. A proper research period would have allowed for the collection of more comprehensive data and a deeper exploration of the research findings. As classroom observation was included in the data collection in this research, the limited duration of this research restricted the extent of data collection method, potentially influencing the overall depth of analysis. Additional variables could have been investigated to provide a deeper understanding of ESL classroom and preschoolers' behaviours if the researcher had been given more time.

Lastly, language barriers posed challenges to this research process too. Approximately 50% of children in the preschool came from Mandarin-speaking families which may have influenced their ability to fully engage in the ESL instructional intervention in such a short period of time. Pre-school children's comprehension on the instructions and their willingness to participate in the group discussions and play activities might be affected due to language diversity, which may have introduced its variability in data collection, especially when evaluating children's engagement and interaction patterns. Further research may benefit from a more extended research period, using larger sample and alternative data collection methods, which might minimize the observer effects in an ESL classroom.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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