

Exploring The Impact Of Play-Based Learning On Early Childhood Language Development At Kindle Joy Learning Centre

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of Play-Based Learning (PBL) on early childhood language development at Kindle Joy Learning Centre in Medan, Indonesia. Recognizing play as a critical medium for holistic development, the research investigates how structured and unstructured play activities support language acquisition among children aged 3 to 6. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory, the study focuses on key language skills such as vocabulary expansion, sentence structure, storytelling, and communicative competence. Employing a descriptive qualitative research design, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents, and document analysis of lesson plans and progress reports. The findings reveal that Play-Based Learning significantly enhances children's expressive and receptive language abilities, with teachers and parents observing notable improvements in vocabulary use, conversational skills, and narrative expression. The study also identifies challenges in implementation, including limited resources and the need for increased parental awareness. Overall, this research contributes valuable insights for educators, parents, and policymakers by highlighting the effectiveness of PBL in fostering early language development and offering practical strategies for integrating play into early childhood curricula.

Keywords : Play-Based Learning, Early childhood , language development

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1. INTRODUCTION

One approach increasingly adopted in early learning settings is Play-Based Learning (PBL). It is an instructional method where play becomes a meaningful context for acquiring knowledge and skills. Unlike traditional rote methods, PBL encourages exploration, imagination, and communication through both structured (teacher-led) and unstructured (child-initiated) activities. Research supports its effectiveness in developing language skills such as vocabulary, sentence structure, listening comprehension, and storytelling (Fleer, 2018; UNICEF, 2018).

Theoretically, PBL draws from Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, emphasizing social interaction and scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and Piaget's Constructivist Theory, which views play as essential to cognitive and symbolic development. These frameworks highlight how language acquisition is best supported in socially interactive, play-rich environments.

Despite the global endorsement of PBL, its practical implementation—particularly in private institutions in Medan, Indonesia—has received limited academic attention. Previous studies have

focused on infrastructure or curriculum reform, with little focus on how play-based methods directly support language growth in early learners.

This study aims to fill that gap by examining how Play-Based Learning is implemented at Kindle Joy Learning Centre in Medan and how it contributes to early language development among children aged 3 to 6. Both structured and unstructured play activities are explored in relation to the language skills they promote, such as expressive communication and vocabulary expansion.

Three key research questions guide this inquiry:

- 1) What language skills do teachers observe in children as a result of PBL activities?
- 2) Why do educators believe PBL is effective (or not effective) in supporting language development?
- 3) How is PBL implemented in the classroom to foster language acquisition?

The study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. It provides localized empirical evidence to enrich academic discourse on PBL in the Indonesian context. Practically, it offers guidance for educators, parents, and policymakers seeking to enhance language development through play-based strategies in early childhood education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As stated in the previous chapter, the aim of this research is to explore the impact of Play-Based Learning (PBL) on early childhood development at Kindle Joy Learning Centre, with a particular focus on language development. This chapter presents a review of relevant literature and theories that support the study. It provides an overview of the key concepts, benefits, and theoretical perspectives related to Play-Based Learning and language acquisition in early childhood.

A. *Theoretical Foundations*

The grounded theory of play-based learning (PBL) is rooted in the constructivist theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, who emphasized that children construct knowledge through interaction with their environment, peers, and adults. Play is seen as a key medium for learning and development, especially in early childhood, as highlighted in Piaget, Vygotsky, and Beyond (Berk & Winsler, 1997).

1) Piaget's Perspective

According to Piaget, play mirrors cognitive development; during the preoperational stage (ages 2–7), children use symbolic play to represent their thoughts, which helps develop their language and thinking skills.

2) Vygotsky's Perspective

Vygotsky emphasized the importance of the social context in learning, particularly through his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where children progress best with the support of adults or more skilled peers.

B. *The Language Skill Theory*

Language development in early childhood is closely tied to cognitive, social, and emotional growth, and play-based learning provides a natural setting for children to acquire and refine language skills. The Language Skill Theory focuses on three key components of language development: vocabulary mastery, speaking skill, and communicative skill.

1) Vocabulary Mastery

Vocabulary mastery involves both receptive (understanding) and expressive (speaking) use of words, forming the foundation for all other language skills. Nation (2001) explains vocabulary knowledge as including both breadth (number of words known) and depth (understanding and use). Vocabulary develops best through real-life, interactive situations such as thematic play (e.g., pretending to run a shop or visit a doctor). Piaget saw vocabulary as a reflection of cognitive development, while Vygotsky emphasized that vocabulary is learned through social interaction and support within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

2) Speaking Skill

Speaking skill is the ability to express thoughts, ideas, needs, and feelings clearly using correct grammar, pronunciation, and sentence structure. In play-based environments, children develop speaking skills naturally through dialogue and role-play, where they ask questions, give explanations, and describe events. Brown (2007) notes that speaking requires both linguistic competence and the ability to use language effectively in real-time. According to Piaget, children's speech develops from egocentric (self-focused) to social speech as they mature cognitively. Vygotsky viewed private speech (self-talk) as a tool for learning, helping children internalize and organize language before it becomes inner speech.

3) Communicative Skill

Communicative skill is the broader ability to use language effectively in social contexts, including turn-taking, adjusting to listeners, and using gestures and expressions. Hymes (1972) described communicative competence as the ability to apply language appropriately in various social settings—not just knowing grammar. In play-based settings, children practice communicative skills by collaborating, negotiating roles, and resolving problems during group play. Vygotsky emphasized that communication is central to learning, and through guided interactions, children learn the pragmatic use of language. Piaget highlighted the role of perspective-taking—understanding others' viewpoints—as essential for effective and empathetic communication.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research conducted at Kindle Joy Learning Centre, located at Jl. IAIN No. 9, Gaharu, Kec. Medan Timur, Kota Medan, Sumatera Utara, Indonesia. Kindle Joy is a well-established early childhood education institution that implements Play-Based Learning (PBL) as its core instructional approach. The centre offers a structured yet flexible learning environment that blends both structured and unstructured play, which supports children's holistic development, including language acquisition and communication skills. This location was selected due to its strong commitment to innovative, child-centered learning and its emphasis on cognitive growth through play, making it an ideal setting to explore the impact of PBL on early childhood language development.

A. Research Design

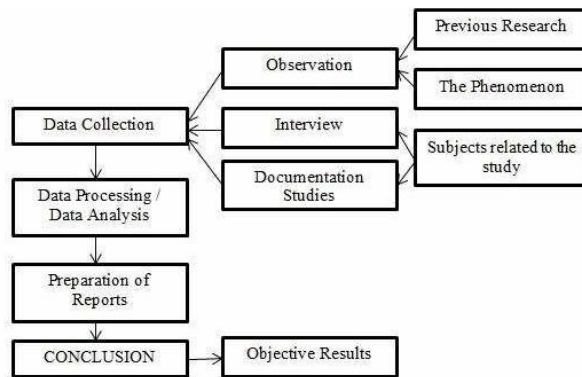
This study uses a descriptive qualitative research design to explore how Play-Based Learning (PBL) supports early childhood language development at Kindle Joy Learning Centre. The goal is to provide a detailed understanding of how children develop language skills—such as vocabulary, sentence structure, and communication through play, without seeking to establish cause-and-effect relationships.

As described by Bogdan and Biklen (2002), qualitative research emphasizes descriptions, observations, and interpretations to understand experiences. This approach is well-suited to examine

how children use language during play, how educators scaffold language learning, and how parents perceive PBL's impact.

Data collection methods include:

- Observation of children's language use and interactions during play,
- Interviews with educators and parents,
- Document analysis of curriculum plans, lesson plans, and progress reports,
- The study will use thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes, offering insights into the effectiveness of PBL and guiding future improvements in early childhood language education.



B. Technique of Data Collection

The study uses three main techniques to gather data on language development through Play-Based Learning (PBL):

- 1) Observations – Non-participant observations during both structured and unstructured play sessions focus on children's language use, including vocabulary, sentence formation, storytelling, and communication. Data is recorded using field notes, audio, photos, and videos.
- 2) Interviews – Semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents explore their views on how PBL supports language growth, including scaffolding techniques and communication observed at home and in class.
- 3) Document Analysis – Curriculum plans, lesson plans, and children's progress reports are reviewed to identify how language milestones are tracked and supported through play-based strategies.

C. Technique of Data Analysis

The study applies thematic analysis with the following steps:

- 1) Data Organization – Information is grouped based on key language development indicators (e.g., vocabulary, sentence structure, storytelling, conversational skills).
- 2) Coding and Thematic Development – Patterns related to language use and educator observations are identified and coded into themes.
- 3) Interpretation and Synthesis – Data is interpreted using Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories, focusing on language development through play, interaction, and scaffolding.
- 4) Triangulation – Data from observations, interviews, and documents are cross-checked to ensure accuracy and strengthen the study's validity.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Language Skills Observed

The data collected from classroom observations and interviews revealed significant enhancements in specific language skills among children engaged in Play-Based Learning (PBL) activities. The following skills were notably improved:

- 1) Speaking: Children demonstrated increased verbal participation, using context-relevant vocabulary and more complex sentence structures during play. For instance, during pretend play scenarios, children articulated phrases like, “Do you know where the ball is?” showcasing their ability to form grammatically varied sentences.
- 2) Listening: Observations indicated that children were more attentive and engaged during group activities, actively listening to peers and responding appropriately. This was particularly evident during storytelling sessions where children listened to narratives and then contributed their own ideas.
- 3) Vocabulary: Both teachers and parents reported noticeable vocabulary expansion. Children frequently used new words learned during PBL activities in their everyday conversations, indicating a strong connection between play and language acquisition.
- 4) Narrative Ability: Children exhibited improved storytelling skills, with the ability to narrate imaginative stories and real-life events. They structured their narratives with identifiable beginnings, middles, and ends, even if grammatical accuracy was still developing.

Here are the result of the data based on their parent perspectives:

(See Appendix A for full interview transcripts)

Initial	Data
H	H has started using new phrases like “ <i>Kamu mau apa?</i> ,” “ <i>Tolong,</i> ” and “ <i>saya mau itu</i> ” after attending Kindle Joy. This indicates that he is developing his vocabulary and language skills as a result of the activities at the center.
LM	LM notes that L has shown significant development in language skills since starting at Kindle Joy, including using new phrases in English such as “mommy, L happy today,” “mommy, L want to pee,” and “ <i>L mau sit down aja.</i> ” This indicates that L is expanding his vocabulary and using language more confidently.
EM	EM notes that Edric has shown improvement in his language skills, including writing and reading. He is beginning to read words and has started using English phrases at home, indicating that he is expanding his vocabulary and language abilities as a result of his experiences at Kindle Joy.
RM	RM notes that Richard has started using new phrases such as “ <i>mami plis,</i> ” “ <i>darurat,</i> ” and “ <i>lebih sabar.</i> ” He is also able to count and express his needs more clearly, indicating that his vocabulary and language skills are developing as a result of his experiences at Kindle Joy.
R	R has started using new phrases such as “mommy open please,” “help,” and “thank you.” She observes that R is speaking more clearly and in longer sentences, indicating an improvement in

	vocabulary and language skills as a result of attending Kindle Joy.
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B. Teachers Perceptions of Play-Based Learning

Analysis of interviews with teachers and parents revealed a shared belief in the effectiveness of Play-Based Learning (PBL) for promoting language development. Key insights include:

Natural Language Acquisition: Teachers emphasized that Play-Based Learning provided a natural and engaging context for language acquisition. They noted that children used language more spontaneously during play, which facilitated organic language development. One teacher remarked, “When children are engaged in role play, language comes out without them even realizing it.”

This perspective aligns closely with Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, which posits that language develops naturally through social interactions within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky emphasized that children learn language best when engaged in meaningful, scaffolded activities with more knowledgeable peers or adults. Play creates such an environment, enabling spontaneous, context-rich language use. Additionally, Jean Piaget’s theory supports the idea that during the preoperational stage, symbolic play fosters cognitive development, including language acquisition, by encouraging children to use symbols and representations.

- 1) **Positive Impact on Communication Skills:** Both teachers and parents observed that children became more confident in their communication abilities. Parents noted that their children were using new vocabulary and sentence structures at home, reflecting the language skills developed in school.
- 2) This observation is consistent with Vygotsky’s view that language is a critical social tool and that communicative competence develops through guided social interactions. Vygotsky believed that children internalize language and cognitive skills through collaborative dialogue. Moreover, Piaget’s concept of egocentric speech evolving into socialized speech explains how children gradually learn to communicate more effectively and adapt their speech to social contexts as their cognitive abilities mature.
- 3) **Dramatic Play as a Catalyst:** Teachers highlighted the role of dramatic play in enhancing communication skills. Activities like pretending to be hunters or superheroes encouraged children to practice turn-taking, social interactions, and vocabulary use in context.
- 4) This emphasis on dramatic play reflects Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, which highlights the importance of social interaction and role-taking in language development. Dramatic play provides rich opportunities for children to practice language in social contexts, negotiate meaning, and develop pragmatic communication skills.
- 5) While Piaget’s theory acknowledges the importance of symbolic play for cognitive development, the social and communicative aspects emphasized by teachers are more directly linked to Vygotsky’s focus on collaborative learning and scaffolding.

Here are the teacher’s perspectives of the effectiveness of PBL :

(See Appendix A for full interview transcripts)

Initial	Data
TS	TS believes that PBL is effective because it makes learning enjoyable and reduces pressure on the children. They feel relaxed and confident, which encourages them to speak more naturally.

	The structured and unstructured play allows for both guided learning and free exploration, which helps children develop their language skills in a supportive environment.
TF	TF believes that PBL is effective because it allows children to feel relaxed and confident, which encourages natural speech. The playful environment helps them to imitate their peers, ask questions, and articulate their thoughts, leading to faster language development compared to formal classroom settings.

C. Implementation Strategies

The implementation of Play-Based Learning activities was strategically designed to stimulate language use and learning through both structured and unstructured play. Key strategies included:

1) Structured Play:

- **Storytelling Sessions:** Teachers incorporated storytelling sessions where children could share their narratives, fostering both expressive language and listening skills. This practice allowed children to practice sequencing their thoughts and using descriptive language.
- **Guided Role-Play:** In structured role-playing activities, teachers provided specific scenarios (e.g., “Looking for treasure” or “I am a hunter”) with defined roles and vocabulary. This approach allowed teachers to introduce new language concepts and facilitate conversations among children, enhancing their speaking and listening skills.

2) Unstructured Play:

- **Free Play Opportunities:** During unstructured play, children were given the freedom to choose their activities and roles. This autonomy encouraged spontaneous language use, allowing children to express emotions, ideas, and stories in their own ways. For example, children might create their own narratives during free play, using imaginative language and engaging in peer discussions.
- **Dramatic Play Areas:** Unstructured dramatic play areas were set up with props and materials that encouraged children to engage in imaginative scenarios. This type of play allowed children to practice language in a less structured environment, fostering creativity and self-expression.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

A. Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of Play-Based Learning (PBL) on the language development of children aged 3–6 years at Kindle Joy Learning Centre, using the theoretical perspectives of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Based on classroom observations, teacher and parent interviews, and analysis of classroom implementation, the following conclusions are drawn, structured according to the research questions.

1) Teachers observed notable improvements in:

- **Speaking Skills:** Increased verbal participation and more complex sentence structures during play.
- **Listening Skills:** Enhanced attention and comprehension during group activities like storytelling.

- Vocabulary Mastery: Rapid acquisition and everyday use of new words introduced during play.
- Narrative Ability: Improved storytelling skills, with children structuring coherent and creative stories.

These developments highlight how PBL supports comprehensive language growth through socially engaging and meaningful play contexts.

2) Educators strongly supported PBL due to:

- Natural Language Use: Play encourages spontaneous and meaningful communication among peers.
- Confidence Building: Children become more expressive, articulate, and socially responsive through play.
- Dramatic Play Benefits: Role-play scenarios foster important communication skills such as turn-taking, negotiation, and expressive vocabulary.

These observations align with Vygotsky's and Piaget's theories on language development through social interaction and symbolic play.

3) At Kindle Joy Learning Centre, play-based learning is implemented through both structured and unstructured play to promote language development.

- Structured Play:
 - a) Storytelling Sessions: Promote sequencing and descriptive language.
 - b) Guided Role-Play: Provide thematic vocabulary and context for conversation.
- Unstructured Play:
 - a) Free Play: Encourages natural, self-directed language use.
 - b) Dramatic Play Areas: Foster imaginative dialogue, vocabulary experimentation, and collaborative storytelling.

B. Suggestion

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the implementation of Play-Based Learning (PBL) for early childhood language development:

- 1) For Educators: Teachers should diversify play strategies—such as dramatic, constructive, and symbolic play—and tailor interactions to children's individual needs. Regular training in PBL techniques is recommended to strengthen teachers' capacity to create language-rich environments. Involving parents in the learning process can also reinforce language development at home.
- 2) For Parents: Parents are encouraged to support language growth through home-based play activities such as storytelling, pretend play, and open-ended conversations. Maintaining communication with teachers can help align learning between home and school.
- 3) For Future Researchers: Further studies should explore the long-term effects of PBL on broader developmental domains, including social and emotional growth. Research in diverse Indonesian cultural contexts and multilingual or digital play settings is also recommended. Longitudinal studies could offer deeper insights into PBL's sustained impact on language development.

C. Interpretation of the Findings

The results of this study was matched to what we learned from other researches and theories discussed in Chapter II. The observations at Kindle Joy Learning Centre show that Play-Based Learning (PBL) helps young children improve their language skills.

1) Theoretical Frameworks:

- a) Vygotsky's theory says that children learn better when they interact with others. Our findings support this idea because children showed better language skills when they played with peers and adults.
 - b) Piaget's theory highlights the importance of imaginative play for learning. Our study found that children who engaged in pretend play were better at using language creatively.
- 2) Previous Studies: This research also corroborates previous findings that highlight the benefits of Play-Based Learning for language acquisition. Similar to earlier studies, children in this study expanded their vocabularies, enhanced their storytelling abilities, and improved their conversational skills through active participation in play activities. Teachers' observations confirmed that structured and unstructured play experiences facilitated richer language expression and interaction.

However, while much of the existing research examines Play-Based Learning in broader or more generalized contexts, this study provides a localized perspective by focusing on Kindle Joy Learning Centre in Medan, Indonesia. It offers a unique contribution by specifically exploring how Play-Based Learning fosters not only language development but also cognitive skills such as critical thinking, memory, and problem-solving within a specific educational and cultural environment.

Moreover, this study identifies practical challenges faced by educators, such as resource limitations and the need for effective scaffolding strategies to deepen language learning during play. By drawing from real classroom experiences, this research contributes a nuanced understanding of how Play-Based Learning can be strategically implemented to support early childhood development. The findings offer valuable implications for educators and parents aiming to cultivate engaging, language-rich environments for young learners in Medan and similar contexts.

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