Pedagogical Practices and Play-Based Approaches for Teaching English to Preschool Pupils: A Systematic Literature Review (2020-2025)

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ABSTRACT:

Play-based approaches are popular for teaching English to preschool pupils because they engage children in meaningful, immersive language experiences. However, confusion exists among teachers about integrating play effectively into formal education. This systematic literature review explores two main research questions: What pedagogical practices are used in play-based teaching, and What are their effects on young children's English learning outcomes? Using PRISMA guidelines, studies from the Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), MDPI, ScienceDirect (Elsevier), Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and Google Scholar database published between 2020 and 2025 were reviewed. After identifying 82 records, screening reduced the studies to 30. A detailed eligibility checks further narrowed this to 28 and finally 24 empirical studies. Findings indicate music, storytelling, dramatic play, and technology significantly improved vocabulary, pronunciation, and speaking skills. Structured play with clear objectives enhanced children's engagement and reduced language-learning anxiety. Yet, challenges included inadequate teacher training, unclear learning goals, and traditional academic pressures. Recommendations suggest future research should explore detailed teacher training, stronger assessment of language outcomes, and deeper understanding of parental attitudes. Overall, play-based approaches offer considerable promise in preschool English education, provided challenges like training and curriculum clarity are addressed effectively.

Keywords: Pedagogical Practices, Play-Based Approaches, Preschool Pupils, Systematic Literature Review, Teaching English

1. Introduction

Play-based approaches to teaching English in early childhood settings have gained attention because they engage preschool pupils in meaningful social interactions and immersive language experiences (Omane et al., 2023; Reynolds et al., 2021; Lucas, 2023; Roche, Carroll, & O'Malley, 2024). In many parts of the world, educators see English as a crucial language for global communication, and they wish to introduce it during the formative years of children's development (Alemi & Haeri, 2020; Liu, Nam, & Yang, 2024; Radzi et al., 2023). Researchers note that young learners acquire language more naturally when they have hands-on and playful experiences, such as singing, storytelling, dramatic role-play, and interactive games (Bollinger & Myers, 2020;Vijayaratnam et al., 2025). For example, in some real-world preschool classrooms, teachers set up play stations where children pretend to visit a market or a bakery, using English words to communicate and label items. Such playful contexts help children see English as part of their daily activities. However, past studies also highlight that some teachers feel unsure about integrating playful tasks into formal curricula, which makes this approach underused or fragmented (Al-Shalabi, 2022; Özütler et al., 2024).

Several scholars assert that a strong foundation in child-centered methods is lacking among teachers, which can limit children's chances to practice new vocabulary in fun, stress-free ways (Hesterman & Targowska, 2020;
Shen et al., 2024). A deeper problem is that many educational systems expect academic performance even at a preschool level, and this prompts teachers to focus on drilling letters and sounds rather than encouraging exploratory and imaginative play (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020). These differing viewpoints underline a need for clarity about the effectiveness of play-based practices for nurturing English proficiency in young children. In Malaysia, the Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan (KSPK) positions play as the core vehicle for holistic early literacy, stipulating that language outcomes be embedded in songs, role-play and thematic centres. Recent Malaysian studies confirm both promise and implementation gaps: guided phonics games improved engagement in Penang preschools (Kheioh & Low, 2022), while dramatic-play stations boosted vocabulary in Selangor (Radzi et al., 2023), yet teachers still revert to workbook drills under academic pressure (Ali & Bahari, 2020). This Malaysian snapshot, juxtaposed with play mandates in Australia (Hesterman & Targowska, 2020) and China's Anji Play model (Niu, 2023), situates the review comparatively. Some researchers see play-based learning as a bridge between children's natural interests and formal language instruction (Kim et al., 2020; Qayyum, Fatima, & Iram, 2024; Tam, 2022). Yet, other studies reveal that many preschool programs do not offer structured play tasks or do not align them well with English learning objectives (Alenezi et al., 2023; Ali & Bahari, 2020). According to Kheioh and Low (2022), teachers use games or storytelling as rewards in some settings instead of core teaching methods, which may reduce the potential benefits for children's language growth. Studies such as Hyun et al. (2021) and Carolan et al. (2020) have shown that there are some inconsistencies in how parents and educators view the role of play, particularly in cultures that favor more traditional approaches. These variations create an urgent need for a systematic review of existing research aiming to identify the range of play-based pedagogical practices and their reported outcomes. This systematic literature review will be able to help in addressing the questions about whether play-based approaches enhance vocabulary, pronunciation, or literacy skills and whether they foster positive attitudes toward English learning at an early age. Findings could encourage policymakers to promote child-friendly methods, raise awareness about teacher training, and support balanced curricula that respect both academic progress and child well-being. Accordingly, this paper conducts a systematic literature review to address the following research questions:

I. What pedagogical practices are utilized in play-based approaches for teaching English to preschool pupils?
II. What are the reported effects of play-based approaches on preschool pupils' English language learning outcomes?

Although previous studies have examined play-based learning or early English instruction separately, few reviews have systematically synthesized empirical evidence focusing specifically on play-based pedagogical strategies for English language learning among preschool children aged 3–6 between 2020 and 2025. Furthermore, existing reviews tend to emphasize either general early childhood pedagogy or broad EFL outcomes without analyzing how specific play modalities (e.g., music-based play, dramatic play, robot-assisted play) align with measurable English language outcomes. This review advances the literature by (1) synthesizing recent empirical evidence across diverse cultural contexts, (2) categorizing play-based strategies into pedagogically meaningful clusters, and (3) critically examining implementation challenges that influence effectiveness in preschool English classrooms.

2. Methodology

In this systematic literature review, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines were used to ensure a clear and valid selection of studies (Page et al., 2021). First, records were identified through the Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), MDPI, ScienceDirect (Elsevier), Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and Google Scholar database search, yielding 82 initial articles. The next step involved screening these articles based on specific inclusion criteria, which required empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025 in English or Bahasa Malaysia, focusing on preschool pupils (ages 3–6) learning English through play-based pedagogical strategies. Studies that lacked primary data, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method, or involved participants who were not preschoolers were excluded in this review. The remaining records underwent a more detailed eligibility check to confirm the presence of measurable language outcomes and clear descriptions of play-based approaches. This process eliminated articles that only offered theoretical overviews or non-empirical insights, resulting in a final total of 24 studies that aligned with the review objectives. These final articles reflect a range of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches, thus providing rich evidence for examining how play-based teaching influences English skills in early childhood. The PRISMA structure guided each phase of the review to strengthen reliability and transparency of the methods and findings.

Process 1: Identification

In the identification stage, a comprehensive database search was conducted to locate empirical studies examining play-based approaches in preschool English language education. The following databases were systematically searched: Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), MDPI, ScienceDirect (Elsevier), Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), and Google Scholar. The search was limited to studies published between 2020 and 2025 to ensure the inclusion of recent research reflecting current pedagogical practices in early childhood education.

To enhance methodological rigor, structured search strings were developed and applied across major databases, particularly Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The primary search terms included: "play-based learning," "play-based approach," "pedagogical practices," "English language learning," "EFL," "preschool children," and "early childhood education." Boolean operators (AND/OR) and truncation symbols were used to refine the search strategy (e.g., "play-based* AND English AND preschool*"). Search strings were adapted slightly to accommodate database-specific indexing systems and search field requirements, following

recommended systematic review search practices (Chiworeka et al., 2024; Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

The broad database coverage was intended to capture interdisciplinary perspectives from early childhood education, applied linguistics, and educational psychology. Searches were conducted across title, abstract, and keyword fields where possible to maximize retrieval sensitivity while maintaining relevance. The initial search yielded 82 records.

At this stage, all retrieved records were retained for preliminary screening if their titles or abstracts indicated a potential focus on (a) preschool-aged children (3–6 years), (b) English language learning, and (c) play-based or child-centered pedagogical approaches. Studies were included regardless of geographical context, enabling cross-cultural comparison of preschool English instruction practices across diverse educational systems (e.g., Kuwait, Turkey, China, Malaysia, and other regions). Both public and private preschool settings were considered to account for variations in curriculum implementation and institutional constraints.

This comprehensive identification process provided a broad yet relevant pool of literature, forming the foundation for subsequent screening and eligibility assessment stages in accordance with PRISMA guidelines.

Process 2: Screening (Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria)

The second process is screening, where we started by applying clear rules to the 82 records found in the Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), MDPI, ScienceDirect (Elsevier), Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and Google Scholar database. First, we kept only publishing studies between 2020 and 2025. This helped us focus on the most recent research on play-based English teaching in preschool. We also only included studies that used real data including qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method research. We limited our review to papers written in English or Bahasa Malaysia. This made sure we could fully understand the content. Most importantly, we only kept studies that focused on preschool children aged three to six, where English was the main language used in the classroom. After following these rules, we ultimately retained 30 studies that fulfilled every inclusion requirement and withstood the exclusion filters. These studies laid the groundwork for a closer examination of how structured and purposeful play activities support vocabulary growth, emergent literacy, speaking confidence, and other facets of English proficiency in early childhood classrooms. Next, we used exclusion rules to remove studies that did not meet our needs. We left out any articles not listed in the Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), MDPI, ScienceDirect (Elsevier), Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and Google Scholar database. We also removed studies published before 2020 or after 2025. We did not include work that was only theoretical, such as policy papers or literature reviews. Our focus was on studies with real classroom data. We also removed studies that focused on older children or used a different main language, since we wanted to stay focused on young children learning English. Lastly, we excluded any study that did not clearly show how play was used or that did not measure English learning results. By following these steps, we made sure the final group of studies gave strong, clear information about how play helps preschool children learn English. By cross-checking each paper against both sets of criteria, we removed 32 records that failed to meet the essential standards of scope, language, age group, or research approach. The following Table 1 presents eligibility criteria for including and excluding studies on English language instruction in preschools, covering database selection, publication date range, study design, language, population, and research focus.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Description	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Database	Studies must be retrieved from the Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), MDPI, ScienceDirect (Elsevier), Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and Google Scholar database.	Articles not indexed in the Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), MDPI, ScienceDirect (Elsevier), Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and Google Scholar database.
Publication Date Range	Studies published between 2020 and 2025 (inclusive).	Studies published before 2020 or after 2025.
Study Design	Empirical research employing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approaches (excluding systematic literature reviews).	Non-empirical studies such as systematic reviews, meta-analyses, conceptual/theoretical papers, or policy briefs that do not report original empirical data.
Language of Publication	Studies must be published in English or Bahasa Malaysia.	Studies published in languages other than English or Bahasa Malaysia.
Population	Research must involve preschool pupils (or early childhood learners) where English is the main language of instruction.	Research focusing on learners older than preschool age or where English is not the main language of instruction.
Research Topic / Keywords	Studies must explicitly address pedagogical practices and/or play-based approaches in teaching English to preschool pupils.	Studies that do not examine pedagogical practices or play-based approaches for teaching English at the preschool level.

Process 3: Eligibility

During the eligibility stage, the remaining studies were evaluated against more specific and rigorous inclusion criteria, resulting in a refined sample of 28 articles. First, only studies focusing exclusively on preschool-aged children (3–6 years) were retained. Research involving older learners or mixed-age samples without clearly disaggregated preschool data was excluded to ensure developmental consistency and alignment with early childhood education contexts.

Second, only empirical studies reporting primary data were included. Eligible research designs comprised quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches. Conceptual papers, theoretical discussions, policy analyses, and secondary reviews were excluded at this stage to maintain a focus on evidence-based findings derived from classroom or field-based investigations.

Third, studies were required to provide a clear and detailed description of the play-based

pedagogical approach implemented. Acceptable interventions included structured or guided role-play, music-based activities, storytelling, dramatic enactment, thematic learning centers, game-based instruction, and technology-supported play. Articles that merely referenced "play" as a general concept, without explaining its instructional design, implementation procedures, or pedagogical purpose, were excluded to preserve analytical precision.

Finally, each study was required to report measurable English language learning outcomes. These outcomes included, but were not limited to, vocabulary acquisition, oral language development, listening comprehension, pronunciation, early literacy, or emergent reading skills. Studies discussing play-based activities without assessing language-related outcomes were excluded, as they did not provide sufficient evidence to address the review's research questions.

The application of these eligibility criteria ensured that the retained studies offered methodologically sound and pedagogically relevant evidence regarding the role of structured play in supporting English language development among preschool children.

Process 4: Included

The final group of 24 studies gives strong evidence that play-based approaches help preschool children learn English. All the studies followed clear rules. They focused on children aged three to six. They used primary data, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method, showed clear play activities, and measured at least one English skill. These studies used many kinds of play. Some used stories, songs, or drama to help children learn words and understand English better. Others used games and role-play to help children speak more and feel more confident. Several studies used technology, like robots or digital tools, to make learning fun and less stressful. Some also used cartoons and videos to keep children interested and help them use English in real situations. Many of the studies showed data from tests, checklists, or interviews with teachers and parents. These reports showed that children improved in vocabulary, pronunciation, and early reading skills. These results support the idea that play-based learning works well when teachers plan it with clear goals. The studies also showed that teacher training and parents' views affect how well play-based learning works. Together, these 24 studies from Prisma (Figure 1) below gave a clear and full picture of how play helps young children learn English in different places. Their strong methods and clear results make them a good base for understanding how to use play in preschool English lessons.

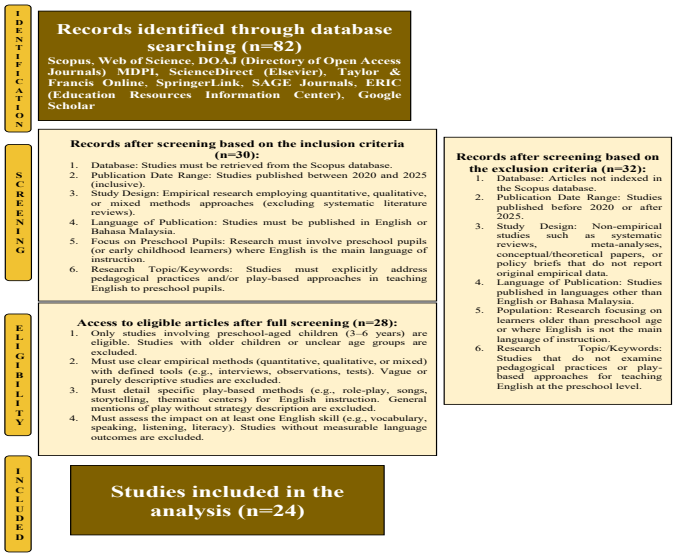

Figure 1. PRISMA Framework

3. Results

Pedagogical Strategies in Play-Based English Instruction for Preschoolers

Many of the reviewed studies highlight how music and creative movement support early English acquisition among preschool learners. Studies by Lee and Lin (2020) and Khamsuk and Whanchitshow (2021) showed that musical storytelling, playful singing, and dance routines help children absorb new words and sounds in a stress-free environment. Similarly, teachers in other contexts integrate simple rhythm activities, repetitive songs, and puppet shows to introduce basic vocabulary, pronunciation patterns, and sentence structures (Khamsuk & Whanchit, 2021; Bollinger & Myers, 2020). These musical or kinesthetic activities often function as multi-sensory tools, allowing children to see, hear, and physically engage with the language. In many of these programs, teachers pair singing with colorful visuals or short role-plays to reinforce comprehension and retention (Alemi & Haeri, 2020; Kabesh, 2023; Khamsuk & Whanchit, 2021; Radzi et al., 2023; Reynolds et al., 2021; Strauss & Bipath, 2020; Tam, 2022). This approach not only energizes the classroom but also encourages active participation, which leads to more natural English usage in social settings.

Dramatic play is a common way to support language learning in preschool classrooms (Radzi et al., 2023). Kheioh and Low (2022) show that role-playing and pretend play help children feel more comfortable using English. These activities make them want to speak and try new words in a fun and relaxed way. Lucas (2023) explains that teachers use costumes, acting, and make-believe settings to get children to say English phrases that match the story. In some studies, teachers set up play areas like a grocery store or a doctor's office. These spaces let children practice real-life English, such as buying food or checking someone's health (Strauss & Bipath, 2020). These guided or free play sessions help children connect words with actions and real situations (Al-Shalabi, 2022). Teachers also help by giving children key words and showing short conversations. This helps children start speaking English more naturally. Some studies also show that tools like robots or English cartoons can make dramatic play more exciting (Alemi & Haeri, 2020; Vijayaratnam et al., 2025). But the research says that teachers still need to guide the play. This helps children stay focused and use English in meaningful ways.

Additionally, many programs weave together storytelling, craft-making, and manipulative games to enhance children's language skills. For instance, teachers might tell a short story and then direct children to act out key scenes using hand puppets or drawings (Kheioh & Low, 2022). Another popular method is to introduce interactive storybooks where children follow along, repeat lines, and answer basic comprehension questions (Reynolds et al., 2021). Some teachers embed phonics instruction or letter recognition into these stories and crafts, encouraging children to spell out words or create simple sentences from pictures (Kim et al., 2020). A few studies highlight that "play" must not be random, but purposeful and linked to clear language outcomes (Al-Shalabi, 2022). In addition, educators sometimes blend guided observation and informal assessments to track vocabulary growth and oral fluency (Radzi et al., 2023). This underscores the necessity of teacher training and reflection in designing effective play-based lessons (Alenezi et al., 2023). Overall, the reviewed articles demonstrate that integrating music, dramatic play, storytelling, games, crafts, and technology into carefully structured yet child-centered activities allows preschoolers to explore English more confidently and joyfully. These methods create an environment that nurtures both linguistic and socioemotional development, laying a stronger foundation for children's future language success.

Impact of Play-Based Approaches on Preschoolers' English Language Learning Outcomes

Many of the studies in this review show that play-based learning helps children improve their English vocabulary, pronunciation, and speaking skills. For example, Khamsuk and Whanchit (2021) found that using stories, repeating key

words, and adding playful activities helped children remember more words. In their study, the children scored higher on tests after learning English through fun and repeated practice. This shows that playful learning can help young children remember words better and feel more confident when speaking. Likewise, Lee and Lin (2020) find that music-oriented play, such as singing or chanting, helps children recognize new words and sentence patterns faster. Kheioh and Low (2022) show that a playful environment encourages shy learners to speak up, because they feel less pressure compared to rote or teacher-centered methods. This aligns with other findings that highlight how games and child-led activities reduce anxiety levels in learners, allowing them to try out new sounds and expressions without fear of mistakes (Reynolds et al., 2021). Many teachers also notice that a more relaxed atmosphere fosters spontaneous peer interaction, which in turn leads to deeper language processing and emergent oral production (Lucas, 2023). These experiences often translate into observable gains in phonemic awareness, fluency, and engagement.

Some studies highlight the positive impact of play on cognitive and socioemotional development, which then enhances English learning. Tam (2022) observes that when children explore stories, crafts, and groups play in a supportive setting, they become more open to experimenting with language. This readiness boosts their ability to pick up new linguistic structures. Kim et al. (2020) note that teachers who integrate formative, playful assessments observe more authentic use of English in natural interactions, showing that children internalize language better when the environment feels safe and engaging. A few studies also look at how technology helps children learn English. Alemi and Haeri (2020) show that robot-assisted play can make children more motivated and less nervous. This helps them speak better in English. Vijayaratnam et al. (2025) find that cartoons and digital media help children learn new words. But they also say that teachers or parents should guide children to make sure they stay focused and do not just watch without learning. Bollinger and Myers (2020) also point out that play stations in the classroom help improve writing and reading. When children see English words as part of their games, they use them in smart and meaningful ways. These studies show that playful tasks can help children think better and feel better about learning English. But the play must match the learning goals and have clear structure.

Researchers do, however, stress the importance of clear objectives and consistent teacher support for these positive outcomes to occur. Al-Shalabi (2022) warns that unstructured games or activities labeled as "play" may not directly lead to better English skills if they lack a language-focused purpose. Conversely, studies such as Radzi et al. (2023) and Niu et al. (2023) show that even if English outcomes are not formally measured, teachers perceive enhanced communicative competence and willingness to speak when they integrate dramatic or manipulative play. Additional benefits emerge in socioemotional domains, such as self-regulation and empathy, which also make young learners more receptive to practicing English (Lucas, 2023; Kabesh, 2023). In many cases, children appear to develop a positive attitude toward learning and are less inhibited from trying new words or sentence structures during play (Strauss & Bipath, 2020). Still, Alenezi et al. (2023) caution that weak curriculum design and inadequate teacher preparation might dilute these gains, especially if teachers are not trained to scaffold the language that arises in playful contexts. Overall, the review suggests that structured, goal-oriented play significantly improves preschoolers' language proficiency, promotes confidence, and nurtures holistic growth, provided that teachers guide and monitor activities to align them with authentic English-learning objectives.

Table 2 presents the Pedagogical Play-Based Approaches in Preschool English Instruction (2020–2025). For each category, authors, location, sample, research methods, play-based pedagogical strategies and impacts were provided.

Table 2. Pedagogical Play-Based Approaches in Preschool English Instruction (2020–2025)

Article ID.	Author(s) & Year	Location	Age Group of Study & Sample (N)	Research Design, Data Collection and Analysis Method	Play-Based Pedagogical Strategies	Impact on English Learning Outcomes
A1	**Alenezi et al. (2023)**	Kuwait	The study focused on kindergarten-aged children (approx. 4–6 years old) in Kuwait, with data collected from a sample of 16 kindergarten teachers.	A qualitative research design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with teachers followed by classroom observations. Data were analyzed to identify recurring themes and challenges in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL).	The study did not explicitly highlight the use of play-based strategies in English instruction. Instead, it revealed that many teachers lacked sufficient training and resources to implement engaging or interactive methods like play-based learning.	While no direct measurement of children's language outcomes was provided, findings suggest that limited teacher preparation, weak curriculum design, and low English proficiency among teachers hinder children's potential to achieve meaningful English language development. The study emphasizes the need for improved teacher training and curriculum enhancement to create a more effective EFL learning environment in kindergartens.

A2	**Özütler et al. (2024)**	Turkey	The study explored perceptions related to preschool-aged children (ages 3–6) in Turkey, involving a sample of 16 teachers, 8 Turkish preschool teachers and 8 Turkish EFL teachers.	The researchers used basic qualitative research design, collecting data through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to compare and interpret teacher perceptions regarding early English language education.	The study did not explicitly report on the use or discussion of play-based teaching strategies. The focus remained on broader perceptions and systemic issues rather than instructional methods.	Teachers acknowledged the benefits of early English exposure for children's language, cognitive, and socio-emotional development. However, both groups voiced concerns about the poor quality of English education, particularly criticizing inadequate program structures and emphasizing a preference for native Turkish speakers as instructors. This reflects a broader belief that cultural familiarity enhances teaching effectiveness in the early years.
A3	**Reynolds et al. (2021)**	Macau, China	The study focused on very young learners (ages 3–5) in Macau, China, analyzing the beliefs of 63 third-year female pre-service pre-primary teachers enrolled in a bachelor's program in early	This was a qualitative case study using written reflection reports. Participants responded to a prompt about teaching English to	A dominant belief among participants was that play-based learning (e.g., songs, games, storytelling, and role-play) was essential for engaging young children in	Participants emphasized that a fun, playful environment fosters children's interest, improves listening and speaking

			childhood education.	young children. Data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis with NVivo 12 software, applying both concept- and data-driven coding frames.	English learning. Most believed that play aligned with children's developmental needs and could enhance their language acquisition naturally.	skills, and reduces anxiety toward learning English. However, some held misconceptions (e.g., about pronunciation and literacy expectations), suggesting a need for improved training in content knowledge and bilingual teaching approaches.
A4	**Bollinger & Myers (2020)**	USA	The study involved preschool-aged children in two classrooms. The sample included 5 participants, including teachers and a preschool director.	This was a qualitative study using interviews and classroom observations. Data were collected from teachers, a director, and children to explore how writing was integrated into play. The analysis focused on understanding teacher intentionality and children's engagement with writing.	The study emphasized the use of learning stations that supported writing through play. Teachers created authentic writing opportunities (e.g., signs, labels, messages) during children's playtime and scaffolded them through intentional interactions and guidance.	Findings indicated that children were more likely to engage in writing when stations were paired with intentional teaching strategies. This approach fostered early writing development, supporting composition skills in a natural, engaging context, thereby enhancing language and literacy acquisition.

A5	**Lee & Lin (2020)**	Taichung, Taiwan	The study focused on four-year-old children. The sample size was selected through purposive sampling, though the exact number is not specified. The location of the study was a private kindergarten in Taichung, central Taiwan.	The study employed mixed-methods design, using both quantitative analysis (pre- and post-tests and observation forms) and qualitative methods (interviews with teachers and parents). Data were collected over 18 weeks with 45-minute sessions twice per week.	The intervention included music-based, play-oriented activities, such as Hello Songs, Letter Songs, Musical Storytelling, Music Appreciation, Musical Movement, and a Goodbye Song. These were built around thematic music elements, encouraging language use in an engaging, multi-sensory way.	The results demonstrated notable improvement in children's English learning, supported by both quantitative gains and positive qualitative feedback from teachers and parents. The integration of music and play fostered increased engagement, vocabulary acquisition, and language comprehension.
A6	**Hesterman & Targowska (2020)**	Western Australia	The study focused on early childhood education (typically ages 3–8) in Western Australia. The sample included 4 play-based learning teachers interviewed and 40 early childhood educators who completed an open-ended survey during a 2017 conference.	A qualitative research design was used. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and an open-ended survey, allowing in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives on play-based pedagogy.	Educators shared their beliefs and values about quality play-based learning, discussing approaches that integrate play into the curriculum, despite external pressures favoring more formalized instruction.	While the study did not directly assess English learning outcomes, it highlighted the tensions between academic expectations and play, suggesting that barriers to play-based learning may negatively impact holistic development, including language and literacy growth.

A7	**Shen et al. (2024)**	China	The study focused on kindergarten-aged children in China, with data collected from 108 EFL kindergarten teachers via survey and 5 follow-up interviews for in-depth insights.	A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was used. Quantitative data was gathered through surveys, and qualitative data was obtained via individual interviews. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were employed to interpret the findings.	Although the study emphasized pronunciation, it did not explicitly explore play-based pedagogies. However, it implied a need for more structured and engaging teaching strategies that may include play elements, especially given the learners' young age.	Teachers recognized pronunciation as a vital component of communicatio n, but challenges like insufficient training, resources, and standardized methods hindered effective instruction, potentially affecting students' long-term English speaking skills and confidence.
A8	**Al-Shalabi (2022)**	Amman, Jordan	The study focused on children aged 4–6 in private kindergartens in Amman, Jordan. A convenient sample of 15 EFL teachers was observed across 45 English classes.	A descriptive qualitative design was used. Data were collected through classroom observations and a self-developed 11-item checklist assessing the use and purpose of games in EFL instruction. Data were manually analyzed for trends and themes.	Teachers showed a limited and inconsistent understanding of educational games. Most used games informally or ineffectively, often as assessment tools. Only 14 out of 45 classes used games, and many activities labeled as "games" lacked structure and clear learning objectives.	The lack of structured game-based strategies and limited teacher training hindered effective language acquisition. The study emphasized the need for professional development and systematic integration of purposeful games to support EFL learning in kindergartens.

A9	**Lucas (2023)**	Northeast Portugal	The study focused on 15 Portuguese preschool children (aged 3–5) from a private school in Northeast Portugal, exploring early English language learning.	A qualitative action research design was used, employing field notes, audio recordings, lesson transcripts, portfolios, and the Leuven Involvement Scale; data were thematically coded and analyses for emergent self-regulatory behaviours.	A CLIL-based, cross-curricular approach was implemented, integrating phonics, storybooks, ICT tools, language play, and child-led activities such as pretend teaching, mazes, and songs to engage learners in meaningful EFL contexts.	The approach fostered strong engagement, self-regulation, emotional literacy, and emergent L2 skills (vocabulary, oral production, content recall), proving preschoolers are capable of meaningful English learning when supported by age-appropriate, play-based strategies.
A10	**Kheioh & Low (2022)**	Penang, Malaysia	Conducted in an urban private preschool in Penang, Malaysia, the study focused on 3 Chinese-ethnic female teachers teaching 5–6-year-old children.	A qualitative case study using purposive sampling, self-report rating forms (knowledge, attitude, practice) and naturalistic classroom observations (30 minutes each), supported by checklists and video recordings.	Teacher Serena used modelled play (clown art and craft), Teacher Ling applied purposefully framed play (guess-the-word game), while Teacher Mian used no play-based strategies, relying solely on workbook-based, teacher-led instruction.	Play-based strategies encouraged child participation, creativity, peer interaction, and engagement in phonics and vocabulary activities. Knowledge level was found to have a greater influence than attitude on successful implementation of play-based learning.

A11	**Khamsuk & Whanchit (2021)**	Suratthani, Southern Thailand	Conducted in Suratthani, Southern Thailand, the study involved nine preschoolers aged 3–5 years using purposive sampling during the COVID-19 lockdown.	A quasi-experimental design was employed, involving pre-tests, storytelling sessions, post-tests, observations, and parent interviews to assess English vocabulary acquisition.	Storytelling in Thai with contextual insertion of three English words per story was used as an engaging, low-pressure home-based language activity involving repetition and visual aids.	The average vocabulary scores improved from 8 (pre-test) to 12.2 out of 15 (post-test), showing effective vocabulary development. Repetition (3+ times) and age were positively correlated with better retention and pronunciation confidence.
A12	**Tam (2022)**	Hong Kong SAR, China	The study focused on preschool-aged children and involved 10 language teachers from a preschool over two years.	A two-year longitudinal case study using interviews and classroom observations to assess changes in teachers' beliefs and practices within a professional learning community (PLC).	The PLC supported a shift towards child-centred play-based learning, influencing changes in instructional strategies, lesson planning, learning activities, and teaching materials.	While English outcomes were not directly measured, the shift towards play-based, child-focused instruction suggests improved engagement and language development potential in early learners.
A13	**Kabesh (2023)**	Cairo, Egypt	The study involved 25 kindergarten EFL students from a language school in Cairo, Egypt, during the 2022–2023 academic year.	A quasi-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design was used. Data were collected using a critical thinking test before and after a SEL-based intervention,	The Social Emotional Learning (SEL) program integrated storytelling, role-play, drama, games, hands-on art activities, and visual tools like graphic organizers to	The SEL program significantly enhanced students' critical thinking skills (e.g., problem-solving, self-regulation, interpretation)

				with results analyzed using the Wilcoxon test.	foster critical thinking through engaging and child-centered methods.	, which are foundational to language development and active EFL learning, creating more confident, reflective, and engaged learners.
A14	**Kim et al. (2020)**	Argentina, Chile, China, and the US	The study involved 139 preschool-aged dual language learners (DLLs) (average age 4 years, 9 months) and 37 preschool educators from Argentina, Chile, China, and the US.	A mixed-methods design was used, collecting data through parental questionnaires, educator-led co-play activities, classroom language observations, and educator surveys. Correlational analyses examined relationships between language proficiencies.	DLLs' English language abilities were assessed using formative, play-based approaches including adult-child co-play and naturalistic language observations, making the evaluation developmentally appropriate.	DLLs showed stronger receptive than expressive English skills, and educators reported that formative tools helped identify language strengths and guided instruction. Results emphasized the value of integrating formative, play-based assessments for better instructional planning in multilingual early childhood settings.
A15	**Vijayaratnam et al. (2025)**	Dhaka City, Bangladesh	The study focused on 20 preschoolers (ages 3–5) and 20 parents in Dhaka City, Bangladesh, from both affluent and less privileged areas, totaling 40 participants.	A mixed-method triangulation approach was used, involving questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and naturalistic observations.	English cartoons served as informal, play-based language exposure tools. Children acquired language through repeated viewing, imitation, and	Cartoons significantly enhanced preschoolers' pronunciation , vocabulary, and sentence use. However, concerns arose over

				Quantitative data were analyzed statistically, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis.	contextual learning embedded in cartoon narratives and songs.	passive learning, behavior imitation, and cultural detachment. Parental guidance was deemed essential to maximize language benefits and reduce negative behavioral or cultural effects.
A16	**Lungu & Matafwali (2020)**	Zambia	The study focused on 21 parents of children aged 3–6 years enrolled in Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres across Zambia.	A qualitative case study design was employed using Focus Group Discussions and observational checklists. Data were analyzed thematically to explore parental perceptions of play-based learning.	Parents generally viewed play-based learning positively, recognizing its role in child development and engagement. However, many expressed concerns about the lack of focus on literacy and numeracy, preferring more teacher-directed academic tasks.	While parents acknowledged that play-based strategies helped children recall words and numbers, many doubted their effectiveness in fostering core academic skills like reading and writing. They advocated for balanced instruction combining play with academic rigor to support early English language acquisition.

A17	**Alemi & Haeri (2020)**	Tehran, Iran	Conducted in Tehran, Iran, the study involved 38 Persian-speaking preschool children aged 3–6 years, randomly assigned to RALL (robot-assisted) and non-RALL groups (19 each).	A quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-tests was used. Pictorial tests assessed comprehension and production of English speech acts, and data were analyzed using independent samples t-tests.	Both groups engaged in story-based lessons with games like "pass the ball" and role-play, while the RALL group used a humanoid robot (NAO/NIMA) to deliver interactive tasks, repeat sentences, and provide feedback in a playful, engaging format.	The RALL group significantly outperformed the non-RALL group in acquiring request and thanking speech acts, showing enhanced comprehension, production, motivation, and lower anxiety due to the robot's interactive, child-friendly support.
A18	**Ali & Bahari (2020)**	Ampang, Selangor, Malaysia	The study was conducted in Ampang, Selangor, Malaysia, involving 11 preschool teachers from three private Islamic preschools focusing on early childhood learners.	Qualitative research design was employed using purposive sampling; data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically for patterns and insights.	Teachers implemented play-based approaches through storytelling, crafts, songs, and games; however, play was often used as a filler or reward rather than a core learning method.	While not specifically focused on English acquisition, the study found that play supported holistic child development and engagement; teachers acknowledged the benefits but faced constraints in time, training, and aligning play with academic and Islamic content delivery.
A19	**Carolan et al. (2020)**	Nova Scotia, Canada	The study focused on children in the year before school	A quantitative survey-based study was used	The program employed a universal play-	While specific English language

			entry (approximately age 4), in Nova Scotia, Canada. Data were collected from 291 parents/guardians during the 2017–18 school year.	to capture parents' experiences with the publicly funded Pre-primary Program. Responses were analyzed to understand perceptions of program quality, access, and play-based learning.	based curriculum aimed at fostering both socioemotional and academic development through child-led, exploratory learning approaches.	outcomes were not measured, parents acknowledged the program's developmental benefits, especially for school readiness, with more positive perceptions linked to stronger school-family communication.
A20	**Hyun et al. (2021)**	U.S. city	The study involved 213 preschool-aged children enrolled in Head Start programs in a large northeastern U.S. city, with participating caregivers primarily being Chinese immigrant parents.	A mixed-methods design was used, combining quantitative validation of the Parent Play Beliefs Scale (PPBS) and qualitative interviews to explore Chinese immigrant parents' beliefs about play and its role in early learning	The Head Start curriculum emphasized peer interaction and play-based learning, allowing researchers to assess how parental beliefs influenced engagement with child-led and interactive peer play.	While direct English outcomes weren't measured, parents linked play to improved social and developmental growth. Positive beliefs about play suggested support for preschool environments that integrate socioemotional development and school readiness, indirectly promoting English language acquisition.

A21	**Radzi et al. (2023)**	Damansara South, Selangor, Malaysia	The study focused on preschool children aged 3–4 years old in a private preschool in Damansara South, Selangor, involving 3 female teachers aged 25–35 years.	This qualitative case study used naturalistic classroom observations (15 sessions over 3 weeks) and informal interviews with the teachers to collect in-depth data on play-based teaching practices.	Dramatic play was the most frequently employed type, followed by creative, physical, and manipulative play. Teachers used thematic stations (e.g., pirate role-play, pretend town) and integrated play into circle time and classroom design.	While not directly measured, play-based learning supported language development, communication, and imagination, aligning with Vygotsky's and Piaget's theories; teachers reported improved social interaction and curiosity, which indirectly enhance language and literacy acquisition.
A22	**Strauss & Bipath (2020)**	Bethel International School, Zhengzhou, Henan Province of China and the DHET/EU funding, University of Pretoria.	The study focused on Grade K children aged 5–6 years in a Chinese ESL classroom; exact sample size not specified but included classroom of 10–12 learners, a homeroom teacher, ESL teacher, and two assistants.	An action research design was employed with data collected through classroom observations, document analysis, informal and focus group discussions; inductive and critical discourse analysis were used.	Guided play using Bingo games, flashcards, audio-visual aids, and worksheets targeted sight word recognition, phonics, grapheme–phoneme correspondence, and vocabulary development.	Guided play enhanced learners' engagement, word recognition, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary acquisition. Teachers scaffolded learners' language use, monitored progress, and created literacy-rich environments to support second language

						development effectively.
A23	**Niu (2023)**	Zhejiang (Anji Play), Shandong (Lijin Play), and Jiangsu, China	The study focuses on preschool-aged children in three Chinese provinces, Zhejiang (Anji Play), Shandong (Lijin Play), and Jiangsu, covering both public and private kindergartens; sample size not specified.	This is a descriptive policy-based case study reviewing national curriculum reform and the implementation of play-based approaches; specific data collection methods are not detailed.	All three models emphasize open-ended, flexible play environments, ample play time, dynamic teacher roles, and child-centred play evaluation, moving away from traditional whole-group instruction.	While not directly measured, the child-centred, exploratory play environment promotes broader language development, communication, and cognitive skills essential for English learning in early childhood.
A24	**Cao & Kong (2024)**	Southeast China	The study focuses on preschool-aged children in two public kindergartens in Southeast China, primarily serving low-income, ethnically diverse families; specific sample size not provided.	A qualitative case study using classroom observations and teacher interviews to examine teaching practices and pedagogical integration.	Teachers blended guided play with traditional collective teaching, incorporating intentionality, active participation, and playfulness into structured lessons, adapting to local cultural norms and child needs.	While English learning outcomes are not directly assessed, the integration of play supports children's engagement, communication, and cognitive development, critical foundations for second language acquisition and early literacy skills.

4. Discussion

The synthesis of the 24 reviewed studies indicates that play-based pedagogical strategies contribute meaningfully to English language development in preschool contexts when implemented with intentionality and structure. Across diverse settings, music-based activities, storytelling, dramatic role-play, and guided games were consistently associated with improvements in vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation accuracy,

and oral participation (Lee & Lin, 2020; Khamsuk & Whanchit, 2021). These approaches appear to function as multimodal scaffolds, integrating movement, repetition, narrative, and social interaction to support young children's language processing and retention. In addition to linguistic gains, several studies reported increased learner engagement and reduced language anxiety, suggesting that emotionally supportive play environments may facilitate risk-taking and spontaneous language use (Reynolds et al., 2021; Kheioh & Low, 2022).

Technology-enhanced play, including robot-assisted instruction and educational cartoons, further demonstrates the potential of interactive and visually rich stimuli to enhance pronunciation, speech act performance, and motivation (Alemi & Haeri, 2020; Vijayaratnam et al., 2025). These findings suggest that digital tools, when integrated within developmentally appropriate frameworks, can complement traditional play modalities rather than replace them.

Beyond measurable language outcomes, the reviewed studies highlight broader developmental benefits. Play-based English instruction was frequently associated with improvements in creativity, self-regulation, collaborative skills, and socio-emotional development (Lucas, 2023; Kabesh, 2023). Such findings align with early childhood education principles that view language acquisition as embedded within holistic developmental processes rather than isolated skill acquisition.

However, the review also reveals structural and pedagogical challenges that may constrain the effectiveness of play-based English instruction. Inadequate teacher preparation, limited professional development in EFL pedagogy, and insufficient curriculum guidance were recurring concerns (Alenezi et al., 2023; Ali & Bahari, 2020). In some cases, play was implemented as a peripheral or reward-based activity rather than as a core instructional strategy aligned with explicit linguistic objectives. Without intentional planning, systematic scaffolding, and clearly defined language outcomes, the potential cognitive and linguistic benefits of play-based learning may be diluted (Al-Shalabi, 2022).

Collectively, these findings underscore that the effectiveness of play-based English instruction depends not merely on the presence of playful activities, but on the quality of pedagogical design, teacher intentionality, and alignment with developmentally appropriate language goals.

5. Conclusion

The systematic literature review shows that play-based approaches help young children learn English well. Many studies found good results when teachers used music, stories, role-play, games, crafts, and technology in the classroom (Lee & Lin, 2020; Khamsuk & Whanchit, 2021; Lucas, 2023). These fun activities helped children learn new words, say them clearly, and feel more confident when speaking English (Tam, 2022; Bollinger & Myers, 2020). Children showed more interest and made better progress when lessons had clear goals and teachers gave strong support (Kim et al., 2020; Alemi & Haeri, 2020). These methods also helped reduce fear and stress. Children spoke more naturally and freely during playful activities (Reynolds et al., 2021; Kheioh & Low, 2022). But there are still some problems. Many teachers do not have the right training. Some do not know how to use play in their lessons (Alenezi et al., 2023; Ali & Bahari, 2020). Some school programs do not support play-based learning well. Learning goals are sometimes not clear (Al-Shalabi, 2022). Some parents and school leaders prefer traditional learning, so play is not always used as much as it should be (Hyun et al., 2021; Carolan et al., 2020). In short, research shows that play, when used with clear goals and support, is a good way to teach English in preschool. Still, more research is needed. Teachers need better training. Schools need clear ways to check learning. We also need to understand how culture affects teaching. These steps will help make play-based learning work better for young children everywhere.

Future studies should look more closely at teacher training for play-based English lessons. Many past studies showed problems like poor teacher preparation, unclear goals for play, and

mixed ways of using play in class (Alenezi et al., 2023; Ali & Bahari, 2020). Future research should explore training programs that give clear steps on how to use play in teaching. It is also important to see how well teachers can use structured play after they attend training sessions (Al-Shalabi, 2022; Shen et al., 2024). Researchers should check how teachers feel before and after training. This can show if the training helps teachers feel more confident and able to use play in their lessons. Many past studies also did not clearly show how play helps children learn English. For example, they did not link play activities to learning new words or speaking better (Tam, 2022; Lungu & Matafwali, 2020). Future studies should use better ways to measure these skills. They can use checklists, language tests, and student interviews to see what children learn through play (Kim et al., 2020). Lastly, future research should look at what parents think about play-based English learning. In some cultures, parents prefer more formal teaching. Understanding their views can help teachers and researchers find a good balance between play and academic work (Hyun et al., 2021; Carolan et al., 2020).

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8. Author Declaration

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study. State no conflicts of interest Authors state no conflict of interest. The data that support the finding of this study were retrieved from the Scopus database. All source documents are accessible via Scopus (www.scopus.com) by users with the appropriate institutional or individual access.