

Playful Learning Approach in an English Class in a Rural Normal School

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ABSTRACT:

Using playful learning methodologies in foreign language learning among adults has gained more attention in recent years, due to the advantages and benefits that students receive from it. The results of an action research intervention with a mixed-method approach are presented, which was conducted in a Rural Normal School, a public federal higher education institution located in the state of Chihuahua, north of Mexico. This research was implemented in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course, involving 90 second-year students pursuing bachelor's degrees in elementary education and preschool education, during the 2022-2023 school year. The purpose of the study was to design and implement a program using a playful learning approach to develop the cognitive, affective, and socio-cultural aspects of the students. The instruments used included participant observation, a teacher's diary, and a structured questionnaire to identify students' experiences in the English class. The results show strong development in the cognitive and affective aspects, and a lesser degree of development in the sociocultural element.

KEY WORDS:

English teaching, higher education, learning process, normal rural schools, playful approach.

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Introduction

When we play, we are engaged, relaxed and challenged – an optimal state of mind for learning through play. We can explore social relationships and experiment with language (Solis et al., 2017). Accordingly, there are numerous studies about the benefits and advantages of using play-based pedagogies with young learners, as it is well established that play during the early years is a central activity for children that is also beneficial in terms of learning and development (McInnes, 2019). However, there has been little research into playful learning in adulthood (Nørgård et al., 2017). Whitton (2018) states that this is an emerging field in higher education, adding that “there is a dearth of research evidence as to its applicability and effectiveness, and a lack of understanding of the underpinning mechanisms that support the hypothesized links between play and learning, creativity, and innovation” (p. 2). Nevertheless, according to Rice (2009) there are various benefits to learning and teaching through play for adults.

In particular, the use of games in foreign language teaching has several advantages, such as increased motivation and engagement in learning (Cruaud, 2018). Similarly, Lucena Romero (2020) makes the case for using this approach as an important resource in foreign language teaching, where professors integrate learning components through educational games or activities that require students to solve tasks using specific language and vocabulary. He states that it increases learners' concentration levels, helps create a relaxing and productive environment, and improves the use of cultural expressions, while decreasing fear of making mistakes. In their study with Uzbek English learners, Jaxongir qizi and Bo'tabayeva (2024) emphasize the critical role that playful methods play, specifically in strengthening English vocabulary and increasing engagement and retention.

In the Latin-American context there is a vast corpus of recent research dedicated to exploring the benefits of playful learning with children and young students. For example, the study by Nury (2019) with elementary school children in Venezuela, or Cevallos-Triguero and Palma-Villavicencio (2022), as well as Chimarro Reinoso (2023) in Ecuador. However, in higher education the studies are less abundant. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning the research done by Cordero Badilla and Núñez et al. (2018) with undergraduates in Costa Rica, Montoya Muñoz (2022) in Peru, Suárez Vera (2013) in Colombia, Alcedo Salamanca (2020) in Venezuela and Narváez Sarango et al. (2023) in Ecuador. To continue in this line of research and contribute to the area in the Mexican context, the purpose of the following study is to design and implement a program using a playful teaching approach to develop cognitive, affective, and sociocultural aspects among learners of an English course. They are 90 young women, students at a Rural Normal School located in the north of Mexico, who during the 2022-2023 academic year were studying to become preschool or elementary school teachers.

Theoretical Framework

According to Kangas et al. (2022), the term 'play' describes a level of engagement in an activity that is enjoyable and is carried out for recreation, rather than having a practical or serious purpose. Additionally, Rice (2009) highlights the four principles of play: it is an experience, has intrinsic motives, focuses on the process rather than the outcome, and involves being engaged. On the other hand, Mora Márquez and Camacho Torralbo (2019) emphasize different characteristics of play, such as the qualities of being rule-governed, fictitious, and non-productive, among others. Play has the potential to provide rich, interactive experiences that can foster learning, as well as cognitive and skill development (Haliuk, 2022). It helps individuals become acquainted with their environment and interact with their surrounding reality, gradually integrating into it (Andrade Carrión, 2020).

Play is an activity that includes emotional, social, and cognitive features, which is why it is a powerful medium to support learning (Mardell et al., 2021). Caon (2020) agrees with this principle, stating that it is "the vital charge in which strong intrinsic motivational inducements become integrated with affective-emotive, cognitive, and social aspects of the learner" (p. 447). Similarly, Garay (2021) states that both children and adults derive intellectual, psychological, and social benefits from play.

Caon (2020) maintains that this methodology is based on two concepts: game and play. As stated by Lucena Romero (2020), when we play, we learn and develop skills. Plass et al. (2014) explain that it is "an activity by the learner aimed at constructing a mental model, designed to include one or more elements of games to enhance the learning process" (p. 6). This teaching approach includes practices and routines that support children's play and learning in education (Kangas et al., 2022).

Accordingly, this methodology is characterized by key features of play, such as being self-rewarding and engaging the whole person (Heidari-Shahreza, 2024). Solis et al. (2017), characterize this approach as joyful, meaningful, iterative, and socially interactive. Playful learning occurs when individuals are active, involved and connecting with their peers (Alsina Tarrés & Farrés Cullell, 2021). For Whitton (2018), examples of tools used in this approach include games, toys, simulations, and puzzles, while the techniques involve pedagogies that facilitate play, such as role-plays, performances, and problem-solving. Plass et al. (2014) propose an integrated design framework of playful learning that includes three basic elements:

- *Cognitive engagement.* Learning based on games is a cognitive activity that contributes to generating mental models by selecting information, organizing it as visual or verbal representations, and integrating this with prior knowledge (Plass et al., 2014). According to Helme and Clarke (2001), it is the thinking process that students engage in while participating in academic learning tasks. On the other hand, Daher et al. (2021) state that cognitive engagement reflects the level of students' involvement in a task in terms of how they approach it. Finally, Rotgans and Schmidt (2011) understand cognitive engagement as a state in which students put a considerable amount of effort and time into understanding a specific topic.
- *Affective engagement.* This aspect is related to students' experiences with emotions, attitudes, motivation, and interest. It is based on the premise that games create higher affective engagement with the learner, leading to increased cognitive engagement and thus facilitating effortless learning (Plass et al., 2014) or flow, where an individual is deeply involved in an activity, experiencing enjoyment and cognitive engagement (Helme & Clarke, 2001). Manzano-León et al. (2021) further delve into this idea by connecting it with intrinsic motivation, arguing that when students enjoy the mechanics of a certain game, learning becomes associated with a pleasant situation. According to Daher et al. (2021), affective engagement pertains to students' emotions (positive or negative) towards the learning process, classmates, and teachers. Additionally, Garay (2021) suggests that this term encompasses the beliefs, feelings, moods, and attitudes that students experience, as well as how the game environment impacts their engagement.
- *Socio-cultural engagement.* Given that learning is socially constructed, games can foster social engagement by providing peers with interaction opportunities (Plass et al., 2014). According to Garay (2021), this term focuses on finding ways for learner participation within groups, utilizing collective knowledge to achieve goals, relating learning to cultural standards and identities, and utilizing social and cultural influences as motivation for learning. Furthermore, Vartiainen et al. (2024) cite Alcock (2013), stating that play is mediated by various socio-cultural elements, such as language, gestures, signs, materials, and actions.

These cognitive, affective and socio-cultural engagement aspects, in turn, involve other essential elements, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The three pillars of playful learning

Cognitive Engagement	Affective Engagement	Socio-cultural Engagement
situated in context	motivation and interest	social context
transfer of learning	emotional design: representation	social aspects of agency
scaffolding and feedback	emotional design: interactions	observational learning
dynamic assessment	goal orientation	relatedness/self-perception
information representation	self-efficacy	
gestures and movement	self-esteem	

Source: own processing based on Plass et al. (2014)

Research Methodology

This study is based on the socio-critical paradigm, which aims to create social transformations in the context where the intervention is carried out (Melero Aguilar, 2011). According to Corona Lisboa (2016), as cited by Loza Ticona et al. (2020), data collection instruments of both an interpretative and positivist nature can be used in this paradigm. Consequently, this research employs a mixed-methods approach, since it “gathers and analyses quantitative and qualitative data in the same research” (Guelmes & Nieto, 2015, p. 24). By using this approach, a significant amount of evidence was collected to better comprehend the phenomena in question and to strengthen theoretical and practical knowledge (Pereira Pérez, 2011).

The participatory action research method provides concrete answers to the issues identified by both researchers and participants (Guevara Alban et al., 2020). It is an innovative methodological alternative capable of creating profound social changes (Melero Aguilar, 2011). The following research phases were implemented: planning, action, observation, and reflection, as established by Sequera (2014). This author defines the first stage as the decision-making process to establish the action plan according to the context being analysed. The next step is to implement the plan, taking into consideration that it must be flexible and can be adjusted according to the emerging needs of the context. Subsequently, the researcher evaluates the action plan by systematically recording the observations. The reflection process follows, which is not considered the final phase but rather a closure of the research cycle where advancements and areas for improvement are reviewed.

Table 2 presents examples of the activities that were implemented as part of the English course with second-grade students. It is worth mentioning that all activities were assessed by the teacher-researcher using the teacher’s diary format and participant observation technique.

Table 2: Action plan for an English course with second-grade students

Topic	Content	Activities	Materials/Resources
<i>Family</i>	possessive pronouns and possessive form, family vocabulary	<i>Go Fish</i> card game with family members, <i>Family Feud</i>	cards, PPT, computer and projector
<i>Games</i>	games vocabulary, imperative form, words related to order	play different board games (<i>Bingo, Jenga, memory, Parcheesi</i> etc.) and make a tutorial	board games
<i>Food and recipes</i>	verbs related to cooking vocabulary, food vocabulary, countable and uncountable nouns, adjectives to describe fruits and vegetables	countable and uncountable nouns memory game, <i>Go Fish</i> card game with restaurant menu, waitress and client role-play, 20 questions	memory cards, <i>Go Fish</i> cards, restaurant menus, pretend plates, silverware and food, plastic fruits and vegetables
<i>Countries</i>	countries and nationalities vocabulary, Wh- questions and answers	<i>Rock Paper Scissors</i> with nationalities, tourist board game	pretend passports and visa stamps, board game, dice, tokens and question cards
<i>Clothes</i>	numbers and colours vocabulary, Wh- questions	<i>Barbie fashion parade, paper dolls dress-up, customer and shop assistant role-play</i>	Barbie dolls and Barbie clothes, paper dolls and paper clothes
<i>Describing myself</i>	parts of the body vocabulary, verb to be	body parts dominoes, <i>Guess Who?</i> , past and present memory game	<i>Dominoes, Guess Who?</i> , board games, memory cards

Source: own processing

The instruments used in this research are the teacher's diary, participant observation, and a questionnaire. The teacher's diary promotes the expression of pedagogical reflections and experiences regarding performance in their teaching practice. Furthermore, it is a tool that facilitates teachers' understanding of their daily tasks and reflection on how to handle conflicting situations in the classroom. It involves a systematic record of incidents to promote positive change. The format used is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Teacher's diary format

Of the Teacher	Of the Student	Didactic Communication
activity	individual behaviour	organization and space distribution
sequence	involvement/ participation	organization and time distribution.
normative/regulatory behaviour	behaviour with their classmates	class work
emotional behaviour	behaviour with the teacher	class-related events
		non-class related events

Source: own processing

Another technique used was participant observation, which enabled the researcher to collect information by actively participating in the events under study and gaining insights into the reality perceived by the study's participants (Rodríguez-Gómez et al., 1996). The format employed was based on the components of cognitive, affective, and socio-cultural engagement proposed by Plass et al. (2014), as shown in Table 1.

Lastly, a structured questionnaire designed by the researcher, based on the proposal of Plass et al. (2014), was administered to 23 key informants selected from the 90 second-year bachelor students using a convenience sample. This instrument is considered the primary method for collecting quantitative data in a standardized manner, which is coherent for analysis (Roopa & Rani, 2012). The questionnaire was divided into four sections: affective engagement (3 questions), cognitive engagement (6 questions), social/cultural engagement (4 questions), and open-ended questions (2 questions). The methodology used to analyse the information was divided into three phases: description, conceptual organization, and theory. In the first stage, data from the three instruments were combined and organized into different categories, which constitutes the second step. Finally, the data obtained were linked to theory and background research to explain the results.

Ninety second-year undergraduates participated in this research, who were students in the bachelor's degree program in preschool or elementary education during the 2022-2023 school year. As part of their syllabus, they have English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course during the first three years of their studies. The main purpose of this subject is for students to develop their foreign language speaking skills in communicative acts, as well as to enhance their awareness and knowledge of English culture, according to the Mexican Ministry of Public Education (Revista Voces, 2018).

The participants of this study are from the Rural Normal School "Ricardo Flores Magón" (ENRRFM), located in the municipality of Saucillo, state of Chihuahua, in northern Mexico. This is a public higher education institution catering to low-income students, founded in 1931, and it functions as a boarding school exclusively for women. It has an enrolment of approximately 400 students and offers two bachelor's degrees: preschool education and elementary school education.

Research Results

The three elements of the framework of Plass et al. (2014) were used to analyse and present the results of this intervention, which are described in the next section:

a) Affective engagement

Due to the extensive amount of data that was collected, the analysis from the participant observation and teacher's diary will focus on the most relevant contents seen in class that are related to each pillar of playful learning, as established by Plass et al. (2014). For the topic of clothes, the learners were enthusiastic about the Barbie dolls. Besides dressing them, they developed their creativity and exercised their fantasies by brushing their hair, naming them, and inventing their background stories. Initially, they had to follow specific instructions to dress the doll in a certain way. They displayed confidence, saying, "this is too easy" and applauding when they got it right; thus showing positive emotions toward the learning process.

The second part of the activity was more open-ended. They were free to dress the dolls however they wanted and then describe what they were wearing. Some organized a fashion parade, making the dolls walk, while others recorded them using their cell phones. They later edited the video with music and shared it with their classmates on social media. This is considered an example of effortless learning, or flow, as the learners were deeply involved in the task, and showed signs of joy and cognitive engagement. During the activity, one of the students started to cry. When the teacher-researcher asked her if she was okay, she answered: "You never know when is the last time you will be able to play".

With the paper dolls task, the teacher-researcher was uncertain whether they knew what they were, but it became clear that they did. They began reminiscing about how they used to play with these types of dolls when they were young. They expressed excitement about designing the dolls' clothes however they pleased, but a couple of them complained about colouring and designing clothes, because they found it boring and time-consuming.

In terms of the topic of family, students experienced a degree of frustration when playing the card game *Go Fish*. This happened because the teacher-researcher used famous families from sitcoms and reality shows, and not all of the learners were familiar with those characters. Nevertheless, some of them showed empathy by helping out their classmates, and those who were confused tried to complete the game, even if it was clear that they had lost some interest.

The *Family Feud* game was a more successful activity since the idea of competing against each other motivated them, even though there were no prizes for the winners. Because there were only two teams and the groups consisted of approximately 25 students, the teams were large, so some did not get involved in the activity and opted to use their cell phones instead. Those who were interested showed a high level of engagement, discussing the best options for the answers. Several questions posed a challenge for them, and in some cases, showed negative emotions such as anger for not guessing the most popular answer. Even if the emotions that they experienced were not positive, it still shows affective engagement of the students with the activities involved in the learning process. After one of them guessed an answer that gave her team many points, she exclaimed, "Now I am ready for the final exam" as a joke, much to the delight of her classmates.

Additionally, Table 4 contains the questionnaire answers that the key informants gave regarding their affective engagement during the English class activities. By analysing the replies that the participants gave to this set of questions, it can be concluded that the program was successful in fostering affective engagement in the learners towards the subject's topics.

Table 4: Affective engagement

Statements	Answers		Percentage	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
<i>The task is motivating for the learner because of the presentation, challenge, curiosity or fantasy development.</i>	23	0	100%	0
<i>The task promotes positive emotions, which generate learning.</i>	23	0	100%	0
<i>The task favours a positive attitude towards the topic that is being taught.</i>	23	0	100%	0

Source: own processing

b) Cognitive engagement

Regarding the topic of food, students engaged with visual data in the memory game, auditory information with the role-play, and kinesthetic learning with pretend food. The scaffolding began with the *Go Fish* card game and menu activities in teams. Then, they practiced vocabulary words and grammar structures in a more complex waitress-client role-play scenario, which required fluent communication and acting out of roles. The transfer of learning was achieved through two different activities with the same purpose: the restaurant card game and the role-play. The students integrated movement into their learning process by identifying pairs in the memory game and acting out roles in the role-play. This activity resembled a real-life scenario, thus situating it within context.

Concerning the unit of countries and nationalities and regarding situated learning, students practiced grammar structures and *wh*-questions that are similar to real-life situations, such as when traveling outside their country. They were able to transfer their learning because they repeated the skill of asking and answering questions many times, each time the students interacted and played with their classmates. Scaffolding was implemented by having them first work in teams for the tourist game and then individually with the passport activity. They used different gestures and movements in the game of *Rock Paper Scissors*. They interacted with aural and kinaesthetic data with the passport activity, and visual information with the tourist game.

Table 5 contains the questionnaire answers that the key informants gave regarding their cognitive engagement during the English class activities. By analysing the replies that participants gave to this set of questions, it can be concluded that the program successfully fostered cognitive engagement in the learners towards the subject's topics.

Table 5: Cognitive engagement

Statements	Answers		Percentage	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
<i>The information and problem of the activity resembles an everyday real situation, which facilitates transfer of learning.</i>	23	0	100%	0
<i>The task favours automatic learning through repeated practice of one skill in different contexts.</i>	23	0	100%	0
<i>The activity assesses the acquisition of skills that need to be learned.</i>	23	0	100%	0
<i>The activity is assessed in a precise and continuous way, and is centred on the students' process.</i>	23	0	100%	0
<i>The activity is presented using more than one mode (visual, aural, tactile or kinaesthetic)</i>	23	0	100%	0
<i>The activity involves motor skills, movements and gestures.</i>	23	0	100%	0

Source: own processing

c) Social/cultural engagement

When the topic of games was taught, the students had to collaborate to follow the rules and reach agreements. When one of them tried to cheat, her teammates would reprimand her to stop that behaviour. The teacher-researcher brought some games that the students were not familiar with, like *Jacks*. In this case, they employed observational learning, since those who did not know how to play studied their classmates and tried to follow their example. Also, they formed connections with other players to achieve a common goal, such as not letting the tower fall in *Jenga*. During these activities, students mediated their interactions using language, materials, and actions.

Additionally, regarding food, the role-play required students to collaborate and interact socially within a shared, pretend context. A social aspect of agency was identified when one of them decided to use a sweater as her apron, and others followed her example. Students were also able to learn by studying their peers, since they played as clients and observed their classmates acting as waitresses, learning new vocabulary words they had asked for, and integrating them into their play. Afterward, they had to reverse roles, giving some of them a model to follow. This role-play activity helped them learn and reinforce cultural standards and identities.

They participated individually in the *Go Fish* card game. When it ended because one of the team members had collected all the menu items she wanted, they expressed interest in playing longer because they were enjoying the game and wanted to win. Due to the available card sets, students had to work in large teams, which had a positive outcome in terms of relatedness, as some of them were used to working with the same two or three people and now had a chance to connect with other classmates.

Table 6 contains the responses to the questionnaire that the key informants provided regarding their socio-cultural engagement during the English class activities. The answers reveal that this aspect needs to be strengthened further, as a small percentage of students did not believe that they benefited from peer collaboration, social interaction, or establishing a sense of connection with their classmates.

Table 6: Socio-cultural engagement

Statements	Answers		Percentage	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
<i>The task produces a benefit for the student through peer collaboration and social interaction.</i>	22	1	95.7%	4.3%
<i>The task involves individual and group work, favouring interaction amongst classmates.</i>	23	0	100%	0
<i>The task helps develop observational learning, as well as the involvement of all participants.</i>	23	0	100%	0
<i>The task favours a sense of connection with the other players, which creates satisfaction, motivation and desire to continue playing.</i>	21	2	91.3%	8.7%

Source: own processing

Discussion and Conclusions

The data collected through the students' questionnaire as well as the teacher's diary and participant observation format reveal a high level of affective engagement with the participants in this study. The learners considered that the class's activities were motivating, promoted positive emotions, and fostered a favourable attitude towards the content as well. The teacher-researcher observed students experiencing effortless learning (Plass et al., 2014) or flow (Helme & Clarke, 2001) when they were deeply involved in the topic of clothes, as well as a wide range of emotions (joy, anger, frustration, delight) during the theme of family. In particular, they exhibited affective engagement and positive emotions toward the learning process, as established by Daher et al. (2021).

Regarding cognitive engagement, both the students' responses and the data obtained from the teacher's diary and observations were positive. The learners maintained that the activities in the class resembled real-life situations, the content was practiced repeatedly in different contexts, and the activities were centred on them. The teacher-researcher identified that students were able to select important information and organize it to represent (Plass et al., 2014), as exemplified by the passports activity during the unit on countries. Also, they clearly invested a considerable amount of time and effort in activities like the waitress and client role-play during the unit on food, to understand the lexical and syntactic content and to be able to apply them in a practical way (Rotgans & Schmidt, 2011).

Evidently, an area that needs improvement is socio-cultural engagement with the students: some of them perceived that the activities did not promote a sense of connection with their peers and that social interaction was not adequately achieved. Nevertheless, the teacher-researcher observed that the learners were able to use language, materials, and actions to mediate their social interaction (Alcock, 2013, as quoted by Vartiainen et al., 2024), especially during the unit on games. Also, the students had the opportunity to interact with their peers and develop social engagement (Plass et al., 2014). The social and cultural aspect is an essential element not only of the playful learning approach but also of learning a foreign language, as the Mexican Ministry of Public Education (Revista Voces, 2018) states. As Tantaleán and Ascoy (2013) note, acquiring a foreign language should include familiarising its cultural elements to promote tolerance of and respect for individuals from different contexts. Thus, future research can explore how to integrate this aspect into playful activities by using resources such as films, music and literature.

A limitation of the study is related to the number of key informants who answered the questionnaire, since a larger sample could generate significant results that could be generalized to other educational contexts. However, the data collected and analysed during the implementation of this study contributes, to a modest extent, to the existing literature on the use of playful learning approaches in the Latin American context, specifically in Mexican higher education. Similarly, implementing Plass et al.'s (2014) proposal for an integrated design framework for playful learning in a different background helps test and assess the authors' program.

The playful learning methodology in foreign language learning in higher education has, as previously stated by Cruaud (2018), Lucena Romero (2020), and Jaxongir qizi and Bo'tabayeva (2024), numerous advantages and benefits for learners. The results obtained by these researchers, as well as the evidence gathered in this study, may act as an incentive for English teachers to try this approach in their classes and to explore their students' opinions about it. As Manzano-León et al. (2021) highlight, the significance of identifying students' perceptions regarding the implementation of playful activities in the classroom can help teachers improve students' acquisition of curricular and social competencies.

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