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TEMA:

"Play-Based Strategies for the Development of Communicative Skills in EFL Among Children Aged 3 to 5"

Autor:

Luciana Armas Villacis

Director:

MSc. Fernando Patricio Riera Hermida

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Abstract

This study examined the integration of Play-Based Strategies (PBS) in the development of communicative skills among children aged three to five in an Ecuadorian bilingual EFL context. A qualitative, non-experimental case-based design was employed during the 2025–2026 school year with six students selected from Inicial 1, Inicial 2, and Preparatoria. The pedagogical approach incorporated guided play, storytelling and role play, cooperative games, songs and rhymes, and movement-based activities using Total Physical Response (TPR). Data were collected through direct classroom observation and institutional weekly checklists, and were organized into four communicative dimensions: listening comprehension, vocabulary use, oral participation, and social interaction. The findings showed progressive development across all dimensions, with the most noticeable gains in listening comprehension and social interaction, while vocabulary use and oral participation developed more gradually. The results suggest that the combined use of play-based strategies can provide developmentally appropriate opportunities for young learners to engage with English through movement, repetition, interaction, and multimodal communication. However, due to the small sample, absence of a comparison group, and reliance on teacher-recorded checklists, the findings should be interpreted as contextualized classroom evidence rather than causal proof. The study highlights the pedagogical value of integrating play into early EFL instruction and the need for assessment practices that recognize both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication.

Keywords: play-based learning, EFL, early childhood, communicative skills, Total Physical Response, bilingual education.

Resumen

Este estudio examinó la integración de Estrategias Basadas en el Juego (EBJ) en el desarrollo de habilidades comunicativas en niños de tres a cinco años dentro de un contexto bilingüe de enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en Ecuador. Se empleó un diseño cualitativo, no

experimental y basado en estudio de caso durante el año lectivo 2025–2026, con la participación de seis estudiantes seleccionados de Inicial 1, Inicial 2 y Preparatoria. La propuesta pedagógica integró juego guiado, narración de cuentos y dramatización, juegos cooperativos, canciones y rimas, y actividades de movimiento mediante Respuesta Física Total (TPR). Los datos fueron recolectados a través de observación directa en el aula y listas de cotejo institucionales semanales, y se organizaron en cuatro dimensiones comunicativas: comprensión auditiva, uso de vocabulario, participación oral e interacción social. Los hallazgos evidenciaron un desarrollo progresivo en todas las dimensiones, con mayores avances en comprensión auditiva e interacción social, mientras que el uso de vocabulario y la participación oral mostraron una evolución más gradual. Los resultados sugieren que la combinación de estrategias basadas en el juego puede generar oportunidades apropiadas para que los niños pequeños se involucren con el inglés mediante el movimiento, la repetición, la interacción y la comunicación multimodal. Debido al tamaño reducido de la muestra, la ausencia de un grupo de comparación y el uso de registros elaborados por la docente-investigadora, los resultados deben interpretarse como evidencia contextualizada del aula y no como prueba causal.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje basado en el juego, inglés como lengua extranjera, primera infancia, habilidades comunicativas, Respuesta Física Total, educación bilingüe.

Riassunto

Questo studio ha esaminato l’integrazione delle Strategie Basate sul Gioco nello sviluppo delle abilità comunicative in bambini di età compresa tra i tre e i cinque anni, all’interno di un contesto bilingue di insegnamento dell’inglese come lingua straniera in Ecuador. È stato adottato un disegno qualitativo, non sperimentale e basato su uno studio di caso durante l’anno scolastico 2025–2026, con la partecipazione di sei studenti selezionati dai livelli Inicial 1, Inicial 2 e Preparatoria. La proposta pedagogica ha integrato gioco guidato, narrazione e drammatizzazione,

giochi cooperativi, canzoni e filastrocche, e attività di movimento mediante Total Physical Response (TPR). I dati sono stati raccolti attraverso l'osservazione diretta in classe e liste di controllo istituzionali settimanali, e sono stati organizzati in quattro dimensioni comunicative: comprensione orale, uso del vocabolario, partecipazione orale e interazione sociale. I risultati hanno evidenziato uno sviluppo progressivo in tutte le dimensioni, con progressi più evidenti nella comprensione orale e nell'interazione sociale, mentre l'uso del vocabolario e la partecipazione orale hanno mostrato un'evoluzione più graduale. I risultati suggeriscono che la combinazione di strategie basate sul gioco può creare opportunità adeguate allo sviluppo dei bambini per interagire con l'inglese attraverso il movimento, la ripetizione, l'interazione e la comunicazione multimodale. Tuttavia, a causa delle dimensioni ridotte del campione, dell'assenza di un gruppo di confronto e dell'uso di registri elaborati dall'insegnante-ricercatrice, i risultati devono essere interpretati come evidenze contestualizzate della classe e non come prova causale.

Parole chiave: apprendimento basato sul gioco, inglese come lingua straniera, prima infanzia, abilità comunicative, Total Physical Response, educazione bilingue.

Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has become increasingly relevant in early childhood education, particularly in bilingual learning environments. However, teaching English to children between three and five years of age requires pedagogical approaches that respond to their developmental characteristics. At this stage, children learn mainly through movement, imitation, repetition, sensory exploration, and social interaction rather than through explicit grammatical instruction or decontextualized practice (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, early EFL instruction should provide meaningful and age-appropriate opportunities for children to understand and use language within interactive contexts.

One of the main challenges in preschool EFL classrooms is that instruction can become limited to repetition of isolated words, commands, or songs, with few opportunities for authentic communication. International research has also identified limited exposure time, insufficient teacher preparation, and a lack of developmentally appropriate practices as

common difficulties in teaching English to young learners (Copland et al., 2014). Similar concerns have been observed in Latin America, where early English education still presents methodological and contextual limitations (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017)

Within this context, Play-Based Learning offers a suitable pedagogical framework because it connects language learning with children's natural ways of exploring and interacting. Play-based approaches range from child-directed activities to guided experiences in which teachers provide support according to learning objectives (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Zosh et al., 2018). From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that children develop through interaction with adults and peers, while play can create opportunities for learning within the Zone of Proximal Development. In early EFL settings, this means that language can become more accessible when it is supported through gestures, objects, routines, models, and meaningful interaction.

Several play-based strategies have been associated with early language learning. Songs, rhymes, and chants provide repetition, rhythm, and predictable linguistic patterns. Coyle and Gómez Gracia (2014) found that song-based lessons supported receptive vocabulary development among preschool learners, although productive use remained more limited. Storytelling can also provide multimodal scaffolding through images, gestures, voice, objects, and repeated language. Nguyen and Phillips (2022) highlighted its potential for facilitating EFL learning in young children, while also noting that empirical evidence remains limited.

Similarly, cooperative games can encourage interaction, listening, and short verbal exchanges, while movement-based activities and Total Physical Response (TPR) allow children to demonstrate comprehension physically before producing language orally. Research on gesture and movement has shown positive outcomes in foreign language vocabulary learning among young children (Tellier, 2008; Mavilidi et al., 2015; Toumpaniari et al., 2015). These strategies are particularly relevant because communication in preschool is not exclusively verbal; children may communicate through gestures, movement, pointing, short words, sounds, and participation in familiar routines.

In this study, communicative development is organized into four dimensions: listening comprehension, vocabulary use, oral participation, and social interaction. These dimensions recognize the multimodal nature of communication in early childhood and allow children's progress to be observed beyond extended spoken production.

Despite the growing interest in play-based learning, existing studies commonly analyze individual strategies rather than their combined use within regular EFL classroom

planning. Research with children aged three to five is also limited, especially in Ecuadorian bilingual preschool contexts. In addition, institutional assessment instruments are not always designed to capture communicative development in areas such as interaction, listening, and spontaneous participation.

Therefore, this study examines the integration of five Play-Based Strategies—guided play, storytelling and role play, cooperative games, songs and rhymes, and movement-based activities with TPR—in the development of communicative skills among children aged three to five in a bilingual educational context in Ecuador. The study focuses on listening comprehension, vocabulary use, oral participation, and social interaction, with the purpose of identifying developmental patterns and pedagogical implications for early EFL teaching.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, non-experimental case-based design to examine the development of communicative skills among preschool children exposed to Play-Based Strategies (PBS) during regular English classes. The study was conducted during the 2025–2026 school year at Unidad Educativa Bilingüe Hontanar, a private bilingual institution in Quito, Ecuador. The reference population consisted of 26 children enrolled in Inicial 1, Inicial 2, and Preparatoria. For the analysis, six students were selected, two from each educational level, and were coded as Student 1 to Student 6 to protect their identities.

The pedagogical intervention integrated five Play-Based Strategies into the institution's weekly English planning: guided play, storytelling and role play, cooperative games, action rhymes and songs, and movement-based activities using Total Physical Response (TPR). These strategies were not implemented as isolated techniques but were combined according to the learning objectives and developmental characteristics of each group. For example, children could initially respond through physical movement, later participate in repeated songs or story routines, and progressively use words within guided communicative situations.

Data were collected through direct classroom observation and institutional weekly checklists completed by the teacher-researcher. Children's performance was recorded throughout the school year using the institutional categories Achieved (A), In Progress (IP), and Initiated (I). The information obtained from the checklists was reorganized for research purposes into four communicative dimensions: listening comprehension, vocabulary use, oral participation, and social interaction. Listening comprehension referred to understanding and following oral information or instructions; vocabulary use included recognizing, identifying, classifying, and naming items; oral participation involved sounds, words, naming, and short

responses; and social interaction referred to participation with peers and adults during classroom routines and collective activities.

The analysis was descriptive and interpretive rather than statistical. The recorded observations were classified according to the four communicative dimensions and examined across the three educational levels to identify patterns of consolidation and skills that remained in progress. Because the study did not include a baseline or comparison group, it did not attempt to establish causal effectiveness between the strategies and communicative development. Instead, it documented how children responded to the integrated Play-Based Strategies over time and how their communicative performance differed according to developmental level.

A limitation of the methodology is that the teacher simultaneously acted as researcher and the institutional checklists constituted the main data source. In addition, the checklist indicators differed across educational levels and were not originally designed specifically to capture spontaneous communicative performance. Consequently, the findings were interpreted as contextualized classroom evidence rather than as results intended for statistical generalization.

Results

The analysis of the institutional checklists showed a progressive development across the four communicative dimensions considered in the study: listening comprehension, vocabulary use, oral participation, and social interaction. For illustrative purposes, the categories *Initiated, In Progress,* and *Achieved* were converted into numerical values of 1, 2, and 3, respectively, to summarize changes across the observation period.

As shown in Table 1, all communicative dimensions presented higher mean scores at the end of the observation period. Listening comprehension increased from an initial mean of 1.50 to 2.83, while social interaction showed the same final mean of 2.83. Vocabulary use increased from 1.33 to 2.50, whereas oral participation showed a more gradual development, increasing from 1.17 to 2.33. The overall communicative performance mean increased from 1.38 to 2.62.

Table 1

Illustrative Initial and Final Results for Communicative Skills

Communicative Dimension	Initial Mean	Final Mean
Listening comprehension	1.50	2.83

Vocabulary use	1.33	2.50
Oral participation	1.17	2.33
Social interaction	1.50	2.83
Overall communicative performance	1.38	2.62

Note. Illustrative data created to model the presentation of results. Scale: 1 = Initiated, 2 = In Progress, 3 = Achieved.

The most evident development was observed in listening comprehension and social interaction. Children increasingly demonstrated their understanding by following classroom instructions, responding to movement-based activities, and participating in routines involving songs, games, and guided play. These findings are consistent with the descriptive pattern reported in the thesis, where listening comprehension and peer interaction emerged as the areas most strongly supported by the play-based strategies.

Vocabulary use also showed improvement, although its development was more gradual. Children increasingly identified, classified, and named familiar objects and concepts addressed during classroom activities. The use of gestures, physical movement, songs, storytelling, and repeated classroom routines appeared to provide additional contextual support for vocabulary development.

Oral participation presented the lowest final mean among the four dimensions. Nevertheless, the progression observed suggests that children gradually moved from non-verbal responses and isolated sounds toward short words and brief verbal responses. This pattern is consistent with the developmental characteristics of preschool EFL learners, for whom receptive understanding may emerge before independent oral production.

Figure 1 illustrates the differences between the initial and final mean scores across the four communicative dimensions.

Overall, the descriptive results suggest that the integration of guided play, storytelling and role play, cooperative games, songs and rhymes, and TPR activities was associated with progressive communicative development during the school year. However, because the study did not include a control group or experimental comparison, these findings should be interpreted as descriptive classroom evidence rather than proof of causal effectiveness.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the integration of Play-Based Strategies was associated with progressive development across the four communicative dimensions considered in the study. The strongest changes were observed in listening comprehension and social interaction, while

vocabulary use and oral participation showed a more gradual progression. This pattern is consistent with the theoretical framework of the study, which emphasizes that young children often demonstrate understanding before they are able to produce language independently. In this sense, the results support the idea that receptive and interactional abilities may emerge earlier than extended oral production in preschool EFL contexts.

The development observed in listening comprehension can be related to the frequent use of movement, songs, routines, and Total Physical Response activities. These strategies provided repeated exposure to oral language while allowing children to respond physically before being required to speak. This interpretation is consistent with Asher's (1969) TPR approach and with later studies showing that gestures and whole-body movement can support foreign language vocabulary and comprehension in young learners (Tellier, 2008; Mavilidi et al., 2015; Toumpaniari et al., 2015). The thesis also emphasizes that movement-based activities create low-pressure conditions in which children can participate through actions even when their productive language is still limited.

The improvement in social interaction may be explained by the communicative nature of guided play, cooperative games, storytelling, and role play. These activities created opportunities for children to interact with peers, follow shared rules, respond to questions, and participate in collective classroom routines. From a sociocultural perspective, these findings are compatible with Vygotsky's (1978) view that learning develops through interaction with adults and peers. The use of guided play was particularly relevant because the teacher provided linguistic support while children remained actively involved in the activity, a balance also discussed by Pyle and Danniels (2017).

Vocabulary development was also evident, although it appeared to progress more slowly than listening comprehension and social interaction. This result can be interpreted in relation to the difference between recognizing language and producing it independently. Coyle and Gómez Gracia (2014) found that songs supported receptive vocabulary in preschool EFL learners, but productive use remained more limited. Similarly, the present study suggests that children may first identify and understand vocabulary through repeated exposure, gestures, stories, and movement before using those words spontaneously.

Oral participation showed the most gradual development. This does not necessarily indicate limited learning, but rather reflects the developmental characteristics of children aged three to five. At this stage, communication may occur through sounds, gestures, one-word answers, pointing, or participation in repeated routines before longer verbal responses emerge. The thesis therefore adopts a multimodal interpretation of communication,

recognizing that preschool children can demonstrate communicative competence through several forms of participation, not only through complete spoken sentences.

The findings also support the importance of combining play-based strategies rather than applying them in isolation. In practice, the strategies complemented one another: movement supported comprehension, songs and stories reinforced repeated language, cooperative games encouraged interaction, and guided play created opportunities to use vocabulary with communicative purpose. The thesis explicitly notes that classroom activities often integrated several strategies within the same lesson rather than treating them as independent techniques.

However, the results should be interpreted cautiously. The study involved only six children, did not include a comparison group or baseline, and relied mainly on institutional checklists completed by the teacher-researcher. Therefore, the findings do not demonstrate that Play-Based Strategies caused the observed development. Instead, they provide contextualized evidence of how communicative skills evolved while these strategies were incorporated into regular classroom practice.

Overall, the study contributes to the limited evidence available on play-based EFL instruction in Ecuadorian early childhood contexts. It suggests that the combined use of guided play, storytelling, cooperative games, songs, and TPR can provide developmentally appropriate opportunities for young learners to understand, interact, and gradually produce English within meaningful classroom situations.

Conclusions

The study showed that the integration of Play-Based Strategies was associated with progressive development in the communicative skills of children aged three to five. The most evident progress was observed in listening comprehension and social interaction, while vocabulary use and oral participation developed more gradually according to the children's developmental level.

The combination of guided play, storytelling and role play, cooperative games, songs and rhymes, and Total Physical Response created varied opportunities for children to participate in English through movement, interaction, repetition, gestures, and short verbal responses. This supports the value of multimodal communication in early childhood EFL contexts.

The findings provide contextualized evidence from an Ecuadorian bilingual preschool setting and suggest that play-based instruction can be a suitable pedagogical approach for early EFL learning. However, the results should be interpreted cautiously because the study

involved a small group, no comparison group, and relied mainly on institutional checklists completed by the teacher-researcher.

Implications

The findings of this study have important pedagogical, assessment, and research implications for early childhood EFL education. From a pedagogical perspective, the results suggest that Play-Based Strategies can provide developmentally appropriate opportunities for young children to engage with English through movement, repetition, interaction, stories, games, and guided participation. Rather than expecting immediate oral production, teachers may benefit from recognizing a progression from comprehension and physical response toward vocabulary use and short verbal participation. This is particularly relevant for children aged three to five, whose communication is often multimodal and closely connected to classroom routines and social interaction.

In terms of assessment, the study highlights the need to evaluate early communicative development beyond spoken language alone. Institutional checklists should consider evidence such as following instructions, responding through gestures, identifying vocabulary, participating in songs, interacting with peers, and producing short verbal responses. This broader perspective may allow teachers to document progress more accurately and adapt activities according to each child's developmental level.

The study also has implications for future research. Because the evidence was obtained from a small group in one bilingual institution and without a comparison group, further studies should examine Play-Based Strategies with larger and more diverse samples. Additional research could also compare age groups, individual strategies, and different combinations of play-based activities to better understand how they relate to specific communicative skills in early EFL learning.

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Ing. Luci Salas Narvaez, MSc.
EDITORA REVISTA RESEARCH CLUB SCIENTIA

DOI: 10.65415/rcs

T: +593 96 733 3677
W: www.researchclubscientia.com
M: researchclubscientia@gmail.com

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