

Children's Voices and Positive Affective Outcomes Regarding Play-Based Language Learning

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Abstract

Learner-centeredness is a consistent theme in the field of education. Yet, the perspectives of young learners are still barely considered. Lightbown and Spada (2013) have pointed out that even though young children have not developed cognitive maturity and the metalinguistic awareness of adolescents or adults, they learn a language without any stress or anxiety. They have the freedom to speak, be silent, pause, and make mistakes when producing the language. It is extremely important, therefore, for teachers to consider presenting relaxing learning contexts and environments for young language learners. This paper reports the positive affective outcomes that have been found in a play-based language learning (PLL) classroom and young EFL learners' opinions of play-based English language learning. The participants were third graders that took part in PLL activities for 15 weeks. Qualitative data were gathered from observations to shed light on the participants' positive affective outcomes and interviews in order to investigate their opinions toward PLL activities. These young language learners' voices and

reflections on the PLL activities provide a unique perspective on the usefulness of play activities integrated into young learners' classroom language learning.

Keywords: play-based language learning, oral language skills, positive affective outcomes, young Thai EFL learners

Introduction

Parents always have a sincere interest in and assumptions about arranging all kinds of activities for their children's physical, mental, social-affective, and language development. Many parents recognize the reasonability of making sure that their children learn effectively. One of the more effective ways for young children to learn is through play. Play is a way in which children are able to express explicitly what they are interested in, how they learn, and how they would like to learn. Generally, play involves physical and mental interaction with either the objects or the humans that the children play with (Vygotsky, 1967, as cited in Bodrova & Leong, 2007). While children are working with objects, they begin to figure out solutions to problems as well as interpret symbols. Exploration and first-hand experience are key features of physical play, by means of which children are encouraged to explore and later discover their abilities. Novack (1960), citing Dewey (1916), emphasized the child's right to an education whose curriculum is based on child-centered and hands-on experiential learning. With such experience, children understand both the product and the outcome of the learning and the ongoing processes of each learning step. In addition, when playing, young learners learn how to socialize and develop their interpersonal skills while working and interacting with others, which can simply be called cooperative learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Additionally, van Kyuk (2005) sees play as a kind of extra support for children's education, such as language motives and play activities, and points out that play promotes the child's development, including cognitive, emotional, and physical

intelligence.

Children learn to use a language to express their feelings and to reflect on their individual realizations of the world and their language abilities. A low affective filter is said to increase positive attitudes toward learning a language, thus leading to higher language proficiency (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). In that light, learning should occur in a joyful, fun, entertaining, and relaxing environment, and this is seen as a key feature of play. Apart from receiving enjoyment, children use the language to socialize with others during play. In so doing, they learn to identify themselves, understand and unite with others, and state their differences from them. Additionally, they learn how to negotiate meaning, take turns, share feelings, compromise, and take part as members of the society in order to reward themselves, the community, and the larger society (Lee & Rubin, 1979; Monsalve & Correal, 2006; Raban, 2001; P. G. Smith, 2001).

In the Thai context, learners at all levels still have problems communicating in English orally (Nuktong, 2010). The problems caused by the language teachers' lack of a desired level of proficiency as well as uninviting traditional methods of teaching the English language in the classroom have been reported in previous research (Panthumasen, 2007). Furthermore, Thai learners of English generally lack motivation to learn and use English because it is a foreign language that they do not use in their daily life. Lightbown and Spada (2013) have stressed that both motivating content and pleasant learning environments should be taken into consideration when managing the classroom of second language learners. For this reason, in an attempt to find ways to make English language learning fruitful, particularly for young language learners, the present study aimed at exploring the use of play-based language learning and its effects on the positive affective outcomes and oral language skill development of young EFL learners in Thailand.

Literature Review

Features of play-based language learning

Play-based language learning is a concept that was developed based on several principles whose emphasis is placed on capitalizing on the real-world experiences of young language learners. In the present study, play-based language learning activities were integrated into an existing English course to promote the oral language development of young learners. It was anticipated that after engaging in play-based language learning activities, the young learners that were the study participants would also develop positive affective outcomes as a result of their engagement. The language focus and play features, two main features of play-based language learning, can be elaborated on as follows.

Language focus

Language is used as a medium to improve the extent of previously denoted areas of child development. Seach (2007) suggested two major elements in developing children's language and communication, namely the reason for communication and a context that fosters meaningful use of the language. Playing with the use of narratives provides a meaningful reason to communicate and having play partners enables children to share the play experience with each other while implicitly learning the pragmatics essential for communication. Frost, Wortham, and Reifel (2001) advocate combining language with physical activities and enjoyment, resulting in the children's development of their well-being. Communicative acts arise from the integration of language use and action, which is a more complex definition of communication (Seach, 2007). Associated with cognitive development, play can be added to language learning. As pointed out by Scarlett, Sophie, Dorothy, and Iris (2005), "[l]anguage adds extraordinary power and flexibility for turning ordinary imitation into make-believe" (p. 35). In other words, language leads to the development of a mental state. In this study, oral language skills were emphasized, which involved assessing listening and speaking skills in

verbal and nonverbal cues/responses through the mediation of interactions and contextual situations. To illustrate this process, Underhill (1987, as cited in Gottlieb, 2006, p. 45) briefly described the speakers' functioning to convey meaning and the listeners' functioning to interpret and respond. The learners take turns taking each other's roles as speakers and listeners to continue their further conversations. Raban (2001) asserted that children, as a matter of fact, can use a wide range of oral language skills, from simple to sophisticated language, for various purposes at home or in the classroom.

Play features

In the present study, four key features of play were examined: play context, playmates, play materials, and playfulness. To begin with, the play context involves the perception that provides individual experiences. For children, meaningful contexts include both the conception of reality (Ramsden, 1992, p. 110 cited in Rice, 2009) and separation from it (Jrank, 2010). In play, the conception of real world knowledge is perceived and interpreted in the context of the children's schemata in order to construct and reflect new knowledge (Rice, 2009). Socio-dramatic play is sometimes used for signaling how children simulate the real world in their mind. Yet, the pretense of ordinary reality tends to be more essential and emphasized as the key extent of play. Parten (1932) supported such a concept by suggesting that play provides a particular opportunity for children to learn flexibility and social skills with different players and different social situations. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) additionally explained that contextual cues are directly related to comprehensible language. In other words, the more supportive the context is, the more comprehensible the language will be. When they are occupied with symbolic play, children build up confidence in their self-expression, virtually exclusively through oral language (Widdowson, 2001, p. 137). To sum up, the contexts of learning particularly suitable and facilitative for young learners should support their imagination, provide a variety of situations, encourage socialization, and promote their positive affections.

According to Verenikina, Harris, and Lysaght (2003), playmates are significant as they enhance a child's social development, and they play a crucial role in scaffolding children's learning. Playmates teach other children to work in teams as well as individually. Some studies give more value to elder play partners such as parents and teachers in their learning and growing. However, the age of the playmates does not matter, and Piaget (1951, as cited in Scarlett, Sophie, Dorothy, & Iris, 2005) supports the position that the same-age child fosters learning similar to that provided by older playmates. Playmates also allow each other to learn roles and about rule assignment. In some types of play, such as competitive games or imaginary situations, roles and rules are negotiated in assigned roles among playmates, who help one another brainstorm ideas and seek possible solutions. Moreover, the development and use of learning strategies can be found in the interpersonal communication between two or more playmates.

Cook (2000) advocates the use of play materials that bestow great value on personal importance and psychological saliency, as well as those that enhance authentic language use in many contextual situations, such as songs, soap operas, advertisements, rhymes, jokes, and prayers. Some scholars view play types in terms of objects and non-objects. Seach (2007) pointed out the increasing level of communicative competence through the use of a variety of toys, games, play materials, and play partners. Furthermore, van Kyuk (2005) suggested that play materials should be used with play activities to support children's learning and help extend their perseverance in finding solutions.

Lastly, a number of research studies have emphasized playfulness with second language learners. Sutton-Smith (1997, as cited in Salen & Zimmerman, 2006) remarked that playful behaviors can be regarded as behavior that transforms an ordinary activity into a playful one through the use of tricks, words, or actions. Pomerantz and Bell (2007) have posited that when teachers employ playful language in the language classroom for adults, the results lead to the enhancement of metalinguistic awareness, and syntactic and semantic development,

similar to when it is employed in a language class for children. In brief, not only can playfulness be an element in increasing linguistic competence, but it is also believed to directly promote social-affective development.

Social-affective development

In order to learn English in a language classroom, motivation and learner-centeredness are viewed by experts as crucial features for young learners. Children's play has been explored for more than half a century as a natural way to enhance learning with pleasure. With respect to second language acquisition, the "natural approach" (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) proposes the *affective filter hypothesis* as one of the key elements for successful second language learning. A low affective filter promotes positive attitudes toward learning a language and leads to higher language proficiency. For instance, role-play for children is an essential vehicle to develop values for oneself. Moreover, assuming roles and establishing rules in dramatic play will enable them to socialize with others effectively in the society.

Additionally, affective development is seen as a distinctive result of play. Children mostly play with curiosity, which leads to learning. However, affective development may be hindered when unfavorable conditions are present. For example, aggressive play or a too-difficult game may discourage them from playing and learning. Consequently, Landreth (2002) remarks that children should learn to play and associate with other people in a positive way in order to continue their play. As a matter of fact, play helps children develop their socialization skills, express their feelings, and establish trust among peers, all of which help them build social relationships. This can be achieved when they are engaged in play activities in a relaxing and stress-free environment.

Furthermore, the spontaneous nature of play substantially bolsters interpersonal skills. In other words, through the opportunity to choose play materials and playmates, children can develop their individual or group learning and playing. Initially, children naturally

play by themselves, but later they learn to play by sharing and cooperating with others or active players (Bailey, 2006). Children develop desire and decision-making and can determine outcomes during their play. Thus, play builds children's self-control in playing independently and with others, which signifies their development in the social-affective domain.

To conclude, play is joyful, allows children to control their learning, and frees them from fear of failure, all of which benefit not only children's cognitive, physical, and language, but also their social-affective development. Children develop more complex behaviors through the feeling of pleasure or enjoyment with the language used as a tool in the interaction in play to convey meanings and feelings (Cordier et al., 2009).

Methodology

Aims

The purpose of this study was to investigate young language learners' positive affective outcomes and opinions regarding their experience in learning the English language through play-based language learning activities.

Setting

The participants in the study were 12 Thai students that were studying in the third grade in the Demonstration School (elementary) of a public university outside Bangkok. They were eight or nine years of age. The study was designed to be a supplementary course to the regular English classes, in which they used English with a foreign teacher one hour per week. Further, there were three volunteer teachers whose ages were between 19 and 25 years. They were studying or had graduated with an English major from the Faculty of Education. These volunteer teachers took the role of external mediators and play partners of the young participants in order to facilitate and encourage target language use. English was used as the medium of instruction by the researcher and volunteer teachers. The content of

the PLL activities were divided into themes, and the course lasted 15 weeks. The lesson of each theme was outlined in terms of content, vocabulary, and language structures derived mainly from an analysis of commercial textbooks and in-house materials used with grade three students. The PLL activities in the language instruction were divided into three learning stages—circle time, centers, and crystallization. During the circle time and crystallization, the participants gathered to do activities, while during the circle time, language play and physical play activities were employed to encourage the students' interpretive language skills. In addition, presentational skills were emphasized during the crystallization stage when the learners shared ideas about what they had played with at the end of the lesson. During centers learning stage, the participants could choose which of the three activities at the three centers they liked to play, including creative play, games with rules, and pretend play activities. They could change to other play centers on the other two days that the class met.

Instruments

The two main instruments included observations and semi-structured interviews. First, observations were conducted using three video cameras to record the participants' behaviors, reactions, and dialogues so that the validity of the data and reliability of the analysis could be ensured. Second, three semi-structured interviews were employed to investigate young participants' realization of play features and language learning, including the activities they chose, the people and materials they played with, their attitudes and opinions toward their play time at home, their play at the centers, PLL classroom settings, etc.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected from observations using video cameras to reveal the young participants' behaviors that represented their affections while learning English with the PLL activities. Furthermore, three semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the

three main units of the course. The interviews were also recorded by video camera. Video clips for both observations and semi-structured interviews were viewed, transcribed, coded, categorized, and analyzed by means of content analysis.

Findings

This section presents the findings that emerged from the use of the PLL activities. The findings from the observations regarding positive affective outcomes were divided into five aspects, while those from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed to shed light on the participants' opinions toward the PLL activities.

Positive affective outcomes

Positive affective outcomes were frequently detected during the implementation of the PLL activities. The participants' behaviors such as smiling, jumping, laughing, raising hands up high, swaying, humming, moving themselves forward, participating enthusiastically, and shouting out the answers were observed and considered evidence of the following: enjoyment; engagement; attentiveness; enthusiasm; motivation; playfulness; spontaneity with the use of target language; creativity; confidence to speak, act, and express feelings; imagination; retention; absence of fear of failure; and cultural learning. Besides this, other affective outcomes that were found included playing by rules, taking roles, and socializing with others. Moreover, the review themes in weeks 5, 10, and 15 illustrated other language development features that the participants possessed, such as quicker responses, automaticity in producing terms and language structure, target language pronunciation, more fluency and continuing the conversation, acknowledging longer instructions, realization of problematic words that were new and difficult to pronounce, better understanding of the written language, and reading development from storybooks.

Positive affective outcomes emerged during the study based on the behaviors found in each theme. There were five aspects that could

be categorized and emphasized, namely enjoyment, creativity, enthusiastic participation, spontaneity, and absence of fear of failure. Table 1 exemplifies positive affective outcomes.

Table 1: The representation of positive affective outcomes

Positive Affective Outcomes	Behavior Representations
Enjoyment	smiling; laughing; saying it straightforwardly that s/he is enjoying it; saying that it is fun; jumping; clapping hands
Creativity	being playful; inventing unreal or extraordinary toys or work; presenting imagination; imitating real-life situation; producing original ideas
Enthusiastic participation	shouting; moving forward to be near the teacher; raising their hands high; being attentive; paying attention; being active; engaging with a particular activity
Spontaneity in using the target language	initiating and controlling their own learning; not being forced or tense; showing self-regulation
Absence of fear of failure	not trembling; continuing to do the present work; being confident to speak, act, and express feelings; speaking out continuously; shouting loudly; not being afraid to ask questions, argue, or share ideas

Enjoyment

Play is fun, pleasurable, relaxing, and entertaining. Children display their enjoyment in play by laughing and smiling. According to Smith and Pellegrini (2008, p. 1), children's positive affection for play is evident when they smile, laugh, and say they enjoy playing. In this study, the participants enjoyed producing their oral language along with play activities of their interest such as storytelling, playing dress up with friends, etc. Excerpt 1 below illustrates the activities for practicing naming different kinds of sickness that the participants saw on the flashcards. They showed a variety of behaviors reflecting their

enjoyment, such as clapping their hands, smiling, laughing, or saying explicitly that they liked it.

Excerpt 1:

T: *How about this? {Point to the next picture.}*

Ss: *He has a cut.*

FU: *Sh-. He hap a cup. {Act and smile.}*

T: *Very good!<=*

FU: *{Clap her hands.}*

Ss: *{Smile; some clap their hands.}*

T: *= He has a cut.*

Ss & FU: *He has a cut.*

MBN: *{Clap his hand and say;} “หนูชอบมากเลยอันนี้” (I really like this one.)*

T: *He has a cut.*

Ss: *He has a cut.*

T: *How about this? {Point to another picture and act.}*

Ss: *H-. She has a ปวดท้อง (stomachache) {Speak Thai with English accent and laugh loudly.}*

T: *She has a stomachache.*

Ss: *He has a stomachache.*

T: *He or she?*

Ss: *She. {Shout.}*

T: *She has a stomachache.*

Ss: *She has a stomachache.*

Creativity

McMahon (1992, p. 1) recognizes the value of play, claiming that “the player is freed to be inventive and creative.” Correspondingly, creativity in play, referring to new knowledge, meaningful adaptation, and application of non-existing to the existing items, can occur while playing, as children manipulate the things around them (Cook, 2000). The National Institute for Play (2009) defines play as the quality of

applying new ideas to existing circumstances. As with producing a new product, new ideas are required. Additionally, it is explained that science fosters play to bring about a new thing or idea, called transformation. In the present study, the activities in each center were designed to incorporate the use of toys so the participants could use their imagination to create new things or extend their ideas from the prepared play materials. The participants showed how they could be playful in the PLL course in Excerpts 2 and 3 below.

Excerpt 2:

T: *What has he got?*

Ss: *He's got (a) big nose.*

T: *What can he do?*

Ss: *He can smell.*

T: *From afar.*

Xx: *KFC. KFC.*

T & Ss: *{Giggle.}*

Excerpt 3:

VTM: *[xx] name? The name of superhero?*

FL: *The name of superhero คืออะไรดี? (What should be the name of Superhero?)*
{Turn to FT and smile.}

FT: *Superlaser.*

FL: *{Laugh.}*

VTM: *Superlaser {Laugh.}*

Excerpt 4:

FS: *หนาวอะไร (It's cold.) {Smile and put the scarf around her neck.}*

FT: *{Laugh.}*

VTU: *Oh, # Is it for winter? Is it for raining?*

FS & FT: *{laugh.}*

VTU: *What do we call? (2 times)*

FT: *Err. [/sku/*

FS: *scarf.]*

VTU: *Scarf. Very good.*

As shown in Excerpt 2, the participants looked at a picture that displayed a restaurant from a distance where the superhero could smell the food. They then were being playful about the food and the restaurant's name with some giggles at the end. Excerpt 3 exhibits how the paired students creatively named the doll they had created together. They combined two words learned in the circle time—"superhero" and "laser eyes"—to become "superlaser." Excerpt 4 was transcribed from the pretend play center in the clothes theme. The participants pretended to wear winter clothes in the winter time, even though, in reality, it never gets cold enough in Thailand to wear a scarf.

Enthusiastic participation

Caillois (n.d., as cited in Salen & Zimmerman, 2006) stated that play, especially a game of chance, always makes the players active. A similar result found in the study carried out by Griva, Semoglou, and Geladari (2010), where game-based contexts were the main instruction for second graders in Greece. Not only did their oral language skills increase, but the students' motivation and enthusiasm also rose. In the same way, the participants in this study were enthusiastic about playing at the center called "games with rules" where they played board games such as Snakes and Ladders and Bingo where they got to throw big dice, walk the markers, pick up cards, and follow instructions on a square they walked into. Excerpt 4 exemplifies the activities for the participants to act out in order to show their understanding. The results revealed that the participants employed non-verbal cues/responses representing their comprehension. In addition to this, they raised their hands, shook their body, and shouted out actively to signify their enthusiastic participation, engagement, and creativity to freely act out individually or with peers for their own learning and understanding.

Excerpt 5:

In the round activity in the circle time, Ss took one flashcard, looked, hid, and acted out for his/her friends to guess. Every S took turns acting out.

FT: *{Act shopping.}*

Ss & VTs: *Oh! Ah! əz'ʰəʊz? (What?)*

MA: *Oh! {Raise his hand and shake his body.}*

MBN: *Ah! {Raise his hand.}*

FPL: *{Shout! Shopping (x2)}*

T: *What is she going to do? (x2)*

FPL: *She's going to buy milk.*

T: *She's going to buy milk. Is it correct? Yes?*

FT: *{Nod her head.}*

T: *Where is she going to?*

FPL & FS: *She's going to supermarket.*

T: *Very good. She's going to the supermarket.*

Ss: *{Repeat after T.}*

Spontaneity

Another predominant feature of play is spontaneity. The spontaneity of play has been explicated as arising voluntarily and naturally without external force. It is designated as a self-initiated and self-regulated activity (Verenikina et al., 2003). During play, children are normally in control of their own playing and learning. Malaguzzi (1998, as cited in Cordier, Bundy, Hocking, & Einfeld, 2009) pointed out the importance of children being allowed to control and to self-initiate tasks. One of those tasks is play, the outcomes of which can be regulated by children, as is evident in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 6:

VTN: *{Summarize.} FPR is the chef. MA is the waiter. And then, you are the customers. {Point to MBN and FT.} You come to the restaurants, okay? Now, you go and walk to the restaurant.*

- MBN & FT: *{Walk out of the center to pretend you are coming to the restaurant.}*
- VTN: *Stand up. (x2)*
- MA: *ที่ไหน (Where am I going?)*
- VTN: *Clean the table.*
- MA: *{Clean the table.}*
- FT: *{Walk in.}*
- VTN: *Take a seat. (x2)*
- VTN: *MA, can you ask the question first?*
- MBN & FT: *{Talk in Thai loudly.}*
- VTN: *Listen. Listen to the waiter first. What are you going to have?*
- MA: *What are you going to have?*
- FT: *{Speak very quickly.} I'm going to have pizza. I'm going to have spaghetti. I'm going to have French fries. I'm going to have soup. {Point at pictures in the menu with smile.}*
- MA: *{Act taking notes of the order and smile.}*
- MBN: *{Start speaking quickly too.} I'm going to have fish. กินทุกอย่าง (I'll eat everything.) {Point at the menu.}*
- VTN: *{Laugh.}*

As demonstrated in Excerpt 6, spontaneity occurred at the pretend play center where the participants pretended to cook and order food and drinks. The volunteer teachers at the center helped them with some content background and language. The pretend play center allowed free talk that fostered the participants' use of different sentence structures in order to be authentic. As a result, they spoke Thai mostly. Sometimes, the volunteer teacher would encourage them to use the structures previously learned. However, this finding revealed surprising dialogues in which the participants that took the role of customer looked at the menu and regulated their own playing. They began to order in English with the correct structure learned in the

circle time. Also, they spoke with full sentences in speed response, and with confidence.

Absence of fear of failure

Play is a time when children do not feel stressed or bored (Landreth, 2002). When they play, they feel free from fear of loss, risk, and harmful or damaging possibilities. For one thing, this feature means that play is pressure-free, as it is fun and relaxing. In addition, the features of creativity and imaginary situations can reduce the tension arising from feeling the need to be right. Correctness is not always of paramount importance. Moreover, exploration and experience allow children to play and learn by trial-and-error. They feel free when they play and analyze their failure, adapt and adjust, and try again as many times as they want in their own time and space. Thus, there is no serious punishment or any undesirable consequences when they play.

Excerpt 7:

T: *{Point to the next picture and act.}*

Ss: *He has: [a.: ชื่นมุนโงง {smile.}*

FL: *Nose> # Nose running>*

T: *{Point to FL to signal that she had a good guess.} He He has a [runny nose.*

FPL: *He has a nose xx]*

Ss: *He has a runny nose. (Two times repetition)*

Excerpt 8:

FL: *{Pick up a mango from a big fruit basket.} How much is that?*

MBP: *Er.: ##### Five. Five teen. Five teen baht.*

FL: *ตอนห้าบาท (Give me 5 baht change)*

MBP: *อ้อ บอกว่าห้าสิบบ (Oh, I said fifty)*

FL: *โธ่ (Oh!)*

MBP: *{Laugh.}*

FL: ครู หงุดหงิดกับใบมะพร้าวมาก ใบมะพร้าวบอกว่า *five teen baht*. (VTN, *I'm confused with MBP, he said 'five teen baht'.*)

VTN: *Fifteen.* {Smile.}

Both Excerpts 7 and 8 reflect that the participants were willing to create meaning and were not afraid to make mistakes. As shown in Excerpt 7, they knew exactly that they needed to use English but they used Thai with playful feelings without worrying whether they were producing the language correctly or not. In Excerpt 8, on the other hand, the participant tried to make meaning using English, even though the vocabulary was beyond his scope of knowledge. It was not necessary for him to feel afraid of experiencing negative consequences when it was during play. Instead, he was learning by making use of different strategies to talk to his friend. Peer-assisted instruction from both friends and volunteer teachers came into play in giving comments and offering the right word choices.

Generally, more than one positive affective outcome could be observed at the same time in the same conversation. The following excerpts display several affective outcomes. For example, Excerpt 9 demonstrates the acting-guessing activity for the sickness theme, which made the participants perceive that they could learn spontaneously and act freely. The teacher showed picture cards, and the participants creatively used code mixing associated with a familiar sound of a word in their knowledge, imitated the English accent, and acted funny in their own way without instructions given. The rise of enthusiastic participation and enjoyment could be observed when the participants were willing to try to give answers. They would raise their hands high and uttered the answers loudly without worrying about errors or negative feedback.

Excerpt 9:

T: *{Point to the next picture.}*

Ss: *He has a # bicycle {Laugh, smile, and say no; laugh to signal that they made joke of*

- their own answer even they know it was not the correct sickness.}*
- Ss: *He has a ##*
- MBP: *ล้ม (fall)*
- T: *{Act.}*
- MP: *xx ข่วน (scratch)*
-
- MBN: *ล้มจักรยาน (fall off the bicycle)*
- T: *He has a /s/*
- FPL & FU & MBN: */skaat/*
- T: *He has a scratch.*
- Ss: *He has a scratch.*
(Two times repetition)
- T: *Mr. MBS, he has a scratch.*
- Ss: *He has a scratch.*
- T: *Okay. This is one time. [One more time and then we'll play:: [game::, okay?*
- FU: *{Clap her hands.}*
- MBN: *เล่นเกม (play game) {Smile.}*
- Ss: *{Clap their hands.}*

Excerpt 10 illustrates the cooperative learning that occurred when the participants discussed and made use of different strategies such as code mixing, negotiation of meaning, item-based construction, and non-verbal cues/responses to whisper to each other because it was a play situation in which they did not want other team to eavesdrop on their responses. The findings showed that the participants assisted each other to scaffold any difficult words they came across, which was followed by giggling and laughing.

Excerpt 10:

Ss got together and worked on what they wanted to act. They thought, brainstormed what to act, and rehearsed their acting. T and VTs helped each group as needed.

FPL: *xx*

- FT: *Broken arm {Act.}*
- FPL: *Shh {Tell FT to keep it down.}*
- T: *{Help the group.} Okay! What do you want? {Show the pictures and point to MA.}*
- MA: *xx*
- T: *Four. Four. One, two, three, four {Point to each student.} Four, okay? {Pause for Ss to think.} And, picture 2?*
- FT: *{Act headache.}*
- FPL: *{Point at the picture – loose tooth.}*
- FS: *{Look at the picture and turn to her friends whispering “cut” and act.}*
- FPL: *Shh {Put her index finger on the mouth.}*
- FS: *Cut. Cut {Whisper to her team and act.}*
- MA: *อะไรอะ (What?)*
- FPL: *{Act headache to her team.}*
- FT & FS: *{Smile and act headache.}*
- FPL: *MA มานี่ (MA come here) {Whisper and gather the team.}*
- FT, FPL, FS: *{Act loose tooth and smile.}*
- FT: *{Point at the picture diarrhea.}*
- FS & FPL: *{Act having diarrhea, smile, and laugh softly in order not to let other teams know.}*
- MA: *ไม่เอาด้วยอะ (I’m not going to do that) {smile.}*
- FS & FT: *{Act diarrhea, laugh, clap their hands.}*
T turned to them to ask what they wanted to act. They replied the key terms in English.

In Excerpt 11, the participants played with the word “bottom” after the teacher’s presentation of another word with a similar sound. Later on, they intentionally gave an incorrect answer in another context just so that they could laugh and have fun, even though they had already learned both words—“muscle” and “bottom.” Also, the

excerpt illustrates how the participants put a structure they had already mastered in a new context to be playful.

Excerpt 11:

VTN showed his muscles to help Ss come up with the new vocabulary “muscle” for them.

FU: Big...

FPL: /botl/ (x2)

VTN: Bottom! {Put his hands around bottoms.} Ohw!

Ss: {Laugh 9 seconds.}

VNT: Bottom is here. {Touch the Ss' bottoms.}

Ss: {Laugh.}

MBN: Buffalo. {Try to guess.}

VTN: Buffalo!?! {Acting buffalo.}

Ss: {Laugh 4 seconds.}

FPL: /mish/ {Guess and laugh.}

VTN: {React like shocking to hear that answer in a funny way.}

Ss: {Laugh.}

VTN: Muscle (x3)

Ss: {Repeat three times and laugh four seconds.}

One minute later.

In the next picture, they uncover another strong superhero.

VTN: Do you know what has he got?

FPL: {Jump and raise her hands.}

MBN: Big muscle.

FPL & FU: Big muscle.

*VTN: Big muscle::: So he can be very {act strong.} ####
very. {Act strong.}*

MBN: Big bottom. {Laugh.}

VTN: No big bottom.

Ss: {Laugh.}

FPL: Big bottom. {Laugh loudly.}

VTN asked Ss to repeat the word “big muscle” with him three times.

PLL features

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of each unit. There were 15 open-ended questions, and the interviews were done in Thai in order to minimize language barriers when the participants expressed their opinions and feelings. The participants' responses were translated into English by the researcher. This section presents the findings regarding the participants' opinions toward different features of the PLL activities.

Language focus

Many of the participants expressed how they had intrinsic motivation to learn English, as exemplified as follows:

“I wanted to communicate with foreigners so I could travel. (MBN)

“I am still not good at English, but I want to improve.” (FU and MA)

The participants' language skills improved because of the mediations of the PLL features, including play contexts, play materials, playmates, and playfulness. The results indicated that they mastered more vocabulary, especially when it was taught in full sentences in context. The PLL activities were intentionally designed to use formulaic speech and provided several reinforcements in different contexts and learning stages. Songs and chants were the types of repetition materials and methods that aided the young learners' memory. Ausubel's subsumption theory (1965, as cited in Brown, 2007) asserts that meaningful learning, opposite to rote learning, increases long-term memory or retention, as evident in the following sentiments:

“It was fun. I knew more English vocabulary such as a head of broccoli.” (FPL)

“I got to think in a new way (a different way) to answer about pears. Before, I didn't know what pears were.” (MA)

“I liked it because I could communicate with others and foreigners. We did not use it outside of the classroom.” (MBN)

“I learned new vocabulary about sickness. I felt good because I could switch to speaking English. I spoke ungrammatical English when I was younger, but now, I have improved.” (FL)

Nearly half of the participants stated that playing and learning English were new to them in terms of the methods of learning, vocabulary learning, and the use of the target language in the classroom. As the participants reflected on the PLL class, they said they liked the activities because they were fun and they had a chance to use the language at the same time.

Play contexts

According to the context of this study, the PLL activities were intentionally designed to be practical for the language classroom, with particular emphasis on natural learning for young learners. That is to say, the activities at each learning stage—circle time, centers, and crystallization—comprised the characteristics of play, which allowed the participants to initiate and control their own learning. In the PLL classroom context, 75% of the participants noted that their favorite center was pretend play. The most important reason was that it was fun. Nearly half of them explained that it was because they were able to dress up, play sports, cook, and pretend to be someone else such as a doctor or a superhero. They also got a chance to play with a lot of play materials, as some of them described: *“I like to dress up as a doctor;” “It made me feel like a real doctor who cured my favorite doll;” “I get to cook, answer questions, and play with picture cards;” and “I like to learn the vocabulary about school supplies such as glue and crayon.”*

The numbers of participants that liked games with rules and creative play were rather similar. The participants that favored games with rules gave the reason that they could play with friends and move around while speaking English, whereas those that preferred creative play mentioned that they were keen on arts and crafts.

When asked which center they did not like, almost all of the participants answered that there was no center they disliked, except for one boy that mentioned that he did not like creative play because it made him feel like turning back in time to his childhood, doing coloring and drawing. He preferred to play with new things instead.

Additionally, some of the participants explained how they also extended their play when they initiated at home:

“I put a Ping-Pong ball under the finger puppet so it could stand and looked chubby and cute. Also, the ice-cream sticks I got from the craft we made in the class were disassembled when I got home. So, I played around with them and made a plant pot out of them. (FT)

“I liked it because I tried it with my little sister when playing with her at home. I asked her to repeat after me.” (FS)

Playmates

Playmates take very important roles for young learners learning a language (Broadhead & English, 2005; Frost et al., 2001). Vygotsky (1978) strongly supported socialization between adults and peers and/or among peers to construct young learners' ZPD and cognitive development. Hyvonen (2011) interviewed 14 teachers who taught kindergarten and elementary levels in Finland and reported the importance of teachers' roles, which increased young learners' learning and development areas. Similarly, the benefits of playmates were found in the present study, as the participants mentioned that they liked PLL because they got to play with friends and adults. Some of their sentiments are illustrated below:

“A fun teacher and games for students to play helped me learn English.” (MU)

“Studying and speaking with friends helped me a lot. If I went abroad such as Singapore and Europe, I could communicate.” (MBP)

Some of the participants explained how they learned English with friends when they encountered some difficulties with language and motivation. They shared their ideas, as can be seen below:

“I felt okay to use English. Although sometimes I did not understand it, I asked my friends and kept listening. I just listened more to what would follow. Then, I just figured it out. (FT)

“Friends, many play toys, and play materials helped motivate my English language learning.” (FPR)

One interesting response from young participants was that they could play with everyone. It could be implied that once interpreted as they were open to share their enjoyment with anyone regardless of gender, age, or social status. However, it is worth noting that the participants mentioned that they did not like to play with friends that played too aggressively, were naughty, always complained, yelled, or whined a lot.

Play materials

Play materials are believed to promote positive affections such as enthusiastic participation, enjoyment, patience, and the absence of fear of failure (Cook, 2000; Howe & Davies, 2005 as cited in Moyles, 2005; Seach, 2007; van Kyuk, 2005). Likewise, in this study, the participants indicated that play materials were an important factor that increased their positive affective outcomes. Scholars have endorsed learning materials to unstructured play toys (Pulaski, 1973 as cited in Singer, 1994) that could let players use their imagination. Drew and Rankin (2004) support the use of open-ended materials, claiming that they improve the children’s well-being and brain development, such as critical thinking and problem solving skills, language enhancement, and social engagement. The more the materials meet their interests and suit their age, the more children are motivated to engage in language learning. The key characteristic of the play materials in this study was that the participants could manipulate the objects to share their thoughts and opinions with one another, a

key characteristic supported by Roskos, Tabors, and Lenhart (2009). However, it is noteworthy that the participants' preferences varied, probably due to such reasons as gender, as one boy stated that he did not like to play with dolls because dolls were for girls. The following excerpts illustrate such sentiments:

"I liked Velcro-cutting fruit toys, and fake money because it was fun and I did not have it at home." (MBS and FT)

"I liked saucepan because it felt real." (FU)

"I liked finger puppets because I had not worn them before." (FL)

"Playing with many play toys and materials could stimulate my engagement." (FPR)

Playfulness

The quality of playfulness refers to the characteristics of play that entail fun and enjoyment, involving the quality of extraordinariness and creativity, as well as absence of fear of failure. Several scholars have supported the benefits of playfulness for learning as it makes language learners experience fun and enjoyment and play temporarily takes them away from their ordinary life (Pellegrini, 1989; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007; Sutton-Smith, n.d. as cited in Salen & Zimmerman, 2006). When asked about their experience with their language learning in the PLL class, most of the participants in this study stated that "fun" was the first thing that came to their mind. Some of the participants explained, for instance, *"I liked it because it made me not embarrassed to speak" (MA)*.

In a situation in which the participants' play did not come out as expected, every one of them thought, "It was fine." They all explained that they would move on, redo it, play with something new, or continue finishing the new project. Examples of further comments are as follows:

"It was okay. It was not real." (MBP)

"If you thought it was fun, the unexpected production would also be fun, too. I liked the unexpected one, although it might not look as beautiful as expected." (FS)

“I laughed at myself. I changed the whole design and got something new instead. I kept fixing it. Or, I played with something else.” (FT)

Comparison of play with the regular English classroom

All of the participants agreed that the two types of English language classes were different. Approximately 80% of the participants mentioned that they preferred studying in the PLL class to regular English classes. The following excerpts reflect the participants' perceptions of the two different types of classrooms. When in regular classrooms, the participants felt that they were more controlled with fewer play activities and also less chance for English language use:

“We always study, sit, write, do homework, and do exercises.”

“We can barely play in the regular classroom or not at all.”

“We are not allowed to walk around, which is bad and boring. Sometimes, we are asked to describe things. We are asked to memorize the vocabulary list.”

“We take notes about grammar from the board. The teacher writes something on the board and asks us to copy it down onto our notebook.”

“There are too many tables and chairs.”

Referring to the PLL classroom, the participants voiced that they had more freedom to control their own learning with more play activities provided, more target language use, and an easier way of learning the language. Some of the positive feelings they experienced are described as follows:

“We got to do a lot more activities.”

“It was more fun.”

“We can half play half learn. We can play and learn at the same time.”

“Play helps me remember vocabulary more and better because I speak while playing, so I can remember it. I can remember vocabulary without having to take notes.”

“It has wider space and it is not messy, which makes it more fun to play and makes me feel more comfortable.”

“I understand the lessons more this way.”

In conclusion, the classroom observations revealed the participants' positive affective behaviors in terms of enjoyment, creativity, enthusiastic participation, spontaneity, and absence of fear of failure when they learned via the PLL activities. The semi-structured interviews reflected the participants' experiential learning in the PLL classroom in terms of the different features of PLL that they could compare to their experience in the regular language classroom. Almost all of the responses indicated that the PLL activities provided a great positive impact not only on their oral language skill development but also on other areas of child development, especially affective development, which could help them become positive and more effective learners.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications from the study findings

As for classroom settings, the participants clearly preferred the PLL classroom setting over that of their traditional language classroom. Teachers should therefore consider arranging more empty space, centers, loud areas, literacy resources, learning tools, and corners in order to create a learning atmosphere that suits the children's interests and proficiency levels and supports the interactive and communicative activities in their traditional classrooms to further facilitate their students' learning and mastery of the target language.

With regard to play activities, teachers of young language learners should consider organizing activities with more freedom characterized by less instruction, more open-ended situations, and more diverse tasks because they promote language adjustment, imagination, and innovation that can extend learners' language skill development. Teachers should use the activities to guide and encourage children to make their own choices regarding communication as well. In addition, both structured and unstructured play toys can be provided. The structured toys can help indicate meanings directly,

while the unstructured or open-ended materials can be utilized to promote imagination and creativity. Drew and Rankin (2004) emphasized the significance of open-ended materials in children's play, as they found that children enjoyed different ways of learning with play materials requiring the use of different skills such as hand-eye coordination and arranging skills.

Playmates are one of the most important features for successful language learning. They facilitate and scaffold language development and can help with self- and peer assessment. They can help correct some of the errors that occur during a conversation, for instance. Playmates can be the teacher, adults from outside the class, and even classroom peers. In the study, it became clear that the less-able participants could learn to be more confident in providing comments and helping to improve their friends' language. Therefore, teachers should seek opportunities to incorporate play with playmates into their regular classroom lessons.

Finally, playful use of language should be integrated into the language classroom. Teachers may make use of extraordinary situations, funny ideas, or deviation from reality to attract young learners' attention and to suit their characteristics and interests. For example, teachers may consider using playful behaviors or language to promote creativity and other affective outcomes.

Recommendations for further research

Further studies should be conducted with different participants such as volunteer teachers and/or parents so as to gain more insight into other stakeholders' perception of the use of play in language learning. Their perception of the values and impacts of PLL activities can lead to improvement of language learning and teaching situations in elementary classrooms.

In addition, studies should be undertaken to explore other impacts of PLL activities on young language learners' affective outcomes, such as negative outcomes, if any, so that more insightful understanding of the use of PLL activities can be obtained.

Longitudinal studies should also be carried out to determine the long-term impacts of PLL activities on the long-term language development of young learners such as the retention of the vocabulary learned during play.

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