



Strengthening Teachers' Integration of Play-Based Pedagogy for English Vocabulary Instruction: A Participatory Action Research Study in a Ugandan Lower Primary School

Gillian Patricia Atuheire¹, Rebecca Nambi², Mathias Bwanika Mulumba² and Josephine Najjemba²

¹Wema Uganda, Kampala, Uganda² School of Education, College of Education and External Studies, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda
Email: g.atuheire@wemauganda.org

Abstract: English vocabulary development is fundamental to early literacy and learners' participation across the curriculum. However, strengthening teachers' capacity to integrate Play-Based Pedagogy (PBP) purposefully into vocabulary instruction requires sustained opportunities to examine, test and refine classroom practice. This study examined how Participatory Action Research (PAR) supported Primary Three teachers to strengthen their integration of PBP into English vocabulary instruction in a selected primary school in Kampala District, Uganda. Four Primary Three teachers participated in four iterative PAR cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection. Data were generated through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, collaborative reflection sessions and reviews of lesson plans and schemes of work and were analysed thematically using deductive and inductive coding. The findings showed that teachers became more intentional in identifying vocabulary objectives, aligning playful activities with intended learning outcomes and creating repeated opportunities for learners to encounter, pronounce, understand and use target words. Collaborative lesson planning, classroom experimentation, microteaching, peer feedback and reflection enabled teachers to examine the relationship between learner engagement and vocabulary learning and progressively refine their instructional practices. Teachers also developed greater capacity to adapt PBP to large classes, limited resources and curriculum demands. The study concludes that strengthening vocabulary-focused PBP requires sustained, collaborative and classroom-based professional learning that supports intentional, reflective and context-responsive pedagogical practice.

Keywords: Play-Based Pedagogy; Participatory Action Research; English Vocabulary Instruction; Teacher Professional Learning; Lower Primary Education; Uganda

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1. Introduction

In Uganda, the Thematic Curriculum encourages songs, games, storytelling, role play and practical activities to make learning engaging and meaningful (National Curriculum Development Centre [NCDC], 2019). These approaches are particularly relevant in the early grades,

where children develop the vocabulary needed to communicate, participate in classroom activities and learn across the curriculum. However, teachers often work in large classes with limited materials, tight lesson schedules and pressure to cover the curriculum, making the integration of play into everyday teaching challenging (Altinyelken, 2010; Schweisfurth, 2015; UNICEF Uganda, 2023).

The challenge is not simply whether teachers use playful activities, but whether these activities are intentionally connected to learning. In vocabulary instruction, this requires teachers to identify the words learners need to develop and create meaningful opportunities for them to encounter, understand and use those words through classroom interaction.

Despite growing interest in PBP, there is limited evidence from Ugandan lower-primary classrooms on how teachers can strengthen these practices through sustained, classroom-based professional learning. This study examined how Participatory Action Research supported Primary Three teachers to strengthen their integration of PBP into English vocabulary instruction in a selected primary school in Kampala District, Uganda. It addressed the following research question: How did Participatory Action Research support Primary Three teachers to strengthen their integration of Play-Based Pedagogy into English vocabulary instruction?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Understanding PBP

Contemporary scholarship conceptualises PBP as an intentional instructional approach that balances children's agency with purposeful teacher guidance. PBP positions play and instruction as complementary rather than competing approaches to learning. It exists along a continuum from child-directed free play to guided and more structured playful learning, with teachers taking different roles depending on the intended learning purpose (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Pyle et al., 2018; Weisberg et al., 2013, 2016). Guided play is particularly relevant because it combines children's agency and active participation with purposeful teacher support through questioning, modelling, feedback and scaffolding (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Skene et al., 2022).

Effective PBP therefore involves more than making lessons enjoyable or introducing games and other playful activities. It requires teachers to connect playful experiences to clear learning goals while creating opportunities for active engagement, meaningful interaction, exploration and learner choice (Dean & Wenner, 2025; Zosh et al., 2018). Evidence suggests that guided play can support learning outcomes, including vocabulary development, when such intentionality is maintained (Pyle et al., 2018; Skene et al., 2022). However, its implementation is shaped by teachers' pedagogical competence and the classroom and institutional conditions in which they work (Mohammed et al., 2026).

2.2 PBP and English Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary is fundamental to children's language development and their ability to participate meaningfully in classroom learning. It involves more than knowing word definitions; learners need to understand words, use them appropriately across contexts and progressively develop their expressive and receptive language (Beck et al., 2013; Nation, 2013). Early vocabulary development therefore provides an important foundation for later literacy and academic learning (Neuman & Wright, 2014).

PBP can support vocabulary development by embedding language learning within meaningful social interaction. Storytelling, dramatic play, role play and guided play create opportunities for children to encounter and use new words in context (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Christie & Roskos, 2006). When vocabulary goals are intentionally integrated into these experiences, learners can repeatedly encounter, understand and use target words through active classroom interaction (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020; Weisberg et al., 2016; Pyle et al., 2018).

2.3 Teacher Professional Learning for Play-Based Pedagogy

Effective implementation of PBP depends not only on teachers' knowledge of playful activities but also on their capacity to make intentional pedagogical decisions about learning objectives, activity design, facilitation and assessment. Research suggests that teachers may value play while experiencing difficulties translating it into purposeful classroom practice, particularly when balancing learner agency with curriculum expectations and instructional goals (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Li & Kangas, 2024). Recent evidence further indicates that teachers' pedagogical design plays an important role in determining how playful experiences are connected to intended learning outcomes (Li et al., 2025).

Strengthening such practice therefore requires professional learning that enables teachers to examine classroom evidence, experiment with pedagogical approaches and reflect on their effectiveness. Research on teacher professional development emphasises that sustained, collaborative and practice-based learning is more likely to influence classroom practice than isolated training events (Avalos, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Within PBP specifically, professional support can help teachers develop greater intentionality in planning, facilitating and adapting playful learning experiences to particular classroom contexts (Nesbitt et al., 2025; Eberhart et al., 2025). Evidence from Uganda similarly points to the importance of strengthening teachers' competence to translate learning-through-play principles into classroom practice (Ngalonsa et al., 2024).

Participatory and reflective approaches are particularly relevant because pedagogical change involves teachers actively examining and reconstructing their own

practice. Through cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection, PAR creates opportunities for teachers to identify instructional challenges, test alternative practices and use classroom evidence to inform subsequent decisions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Kemmis et al., 2014). This positions teachers as active contributors to pedagogical improvement rather than recipients of externally prescribed techniques. In the present study, this perspective provides a basis for examining how collaborative inquiry, classroom experimentation, reflection and lesson redesign contributed to changes in teachers' integration of PBP into English vocabulary instruction.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative Participatory Action Research (PAR) design to examine how teachers strengthened their integration of Play-Based Pedagogy (PBP) into English vocabulary instruction. PAR was appropriate because it enabled teachers to examine their classroom practice while collaboratively identifying instructional challenges, testing pedagogical strategies and reflecting on their experiences. The researcher worked alongside the teachers as a facilitator and participant while systematically documenting changes in practice. The study was implemented through four iterative PAR cycles, each involving planning, action, observation and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). During each cycle, teachers identified instructional priorities, collaboratively planned how PBP could be integrated into vocabulary instruction, implemented the planned approaches and reflected on evidence from classroom practice. Insights from each cycle informed subsequent planning and implementation, allowing teachers to progressively refine their practice.

The study was conducted in a purposively selected private primary school in Kampala District, Uganda. Primary Three was selected because it is the final year of lower primary before learners transition to English-medium instruction in Primary Four. In lower primary, instruction takes place in both the local language and English, although the local language is designated as the principal medium of instruction. The school provided an information-rich context characterised by large classes, limited space and materials, and a strong emphasis on curriculum coverage and academic achievement (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Four Primary Three teachers, two female and two male, participated in the PAR process. Participants were identified as FT01 and FT02 (female teachers) and MT01 and MT02 (male teachers). They were selected because they taught the target class in which the intervention was implemented and were responsible for vocabulary instruction.

Data were generated through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, collaborative reflection

sessions and review of instructional documents. Classroom observations provided the primary evidence of changes in teachers' practice, focusing on explicit vocabulary-learning objectives, integration of vocabulary within play, alignment between playful activities and intended learning, and assessment of vocabulary learning. Interviews explored teachers' experiences, challenges and perceptions of changes in their practice, while collaborative reflections captured their evolving pedagogical reasoning and informed subsequent cycles. Lesson plans and schemes of work provided additional evidence of changes in planning, curriculum alignment and assessment. Evidence from these sources was triangulated to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Data were analysed thematically using deductive and inductive coding, drawing on Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Deductive coding was guided by the instructional indicators informing the study, while inductive coding allowed emerging patterns in teachers' experiences and practices to be identified. Analysis occurred alongside the PAR process, enabling insights from each cycle to inform subsequent planning and implementation. Evidence from observations, interviews, reflections and instructional documents was compared across the four cycles to identify patterns of continuity and change. Codes were then organised into themes representing the major dimensions and processes of pedagogical change.

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from Makerere University and permission was subsequently obtained from the participating school. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to their participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using participant codes (FT01, FT02, MT01 and MT02) instead of names, and identifying information about the participating school was withheld.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the changes in teachers' integration of PBP for English vocabulary instruction across the PAR process. An initial diagnostic phase established the pedagogical starting point, while the PAR phase, comprising four iterative cycles, provided opportunities for teachers to collaboratively plan, implement, observe, reflect on and refine their practices. The findings are organised around three interrelated areas of pedagogical change: developing intentional vocabulary-focused planning; strengthening purposeful vocabulary-focused implementation; and collaborative reflection and lesson redesign as mechanisms of pedagogical change.

At the beginning of the PAR process, teachers demonstrated limited understanding of PBP as an intentional approach to vocabulary instruction. Although songs, games, rhymes and energisers occasionally appeared in lessons, classroom observations and lesson-plan reviews showed that these activities were primarily used to promote participation, maintain attention or manage the classroom rather than to achieve explicit vocabulary-learning objectives. This understanding was also evident in teachers' accounts. FT02 explained, "We let the learners play during break time, but not during lessons. Teaching time is serious time. That is when we expect them to sit properly, listen, write, and follow what we are teaching." Vocabulary instruction remained predominantly teacher-directed, involving explanation, repetition, choral responses, copying and written exercises. Teachers also expressed concerns about curriculum coverage, large classes, limited instructional time and maintaining classroom discipline. These findings established the pedagogical starting point from which changes across the PAR cycles were examined.

This initial separation of play from formal instruction reflects tensions reported in the wider PBP literature, where teachers may value play but experience difficulty reconciling it with curriculum demands and expected academic outcomes (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Pyle et al., 2017). The findings also reinforce the distinction between simply including playful activities and using play intentionally to achieve identifiable learning outcomes (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2013, 2016).

4.1 Developing Intentional Vocabulary-Focused Planning

A notable pedagogical change observed during the intervention was teachers' increasing intentionality in planning vocabulary instruction within play-based lessons. Before the intervention, teachers generally focused on curriculum content while assuming that vocabulary learning would occur naturally during instruction. Consequently, vocabulary objectives were seldom identified explicitly in lesson plans, and play activities were primarily selected to motivate learners rather than to support specific language outcomes.

Through collaborative lesson planning and professional dialogue, teachers began to recognise that effective vocabulary learning required deliberate planning. Rather than relying on incidental exposure to words during teaching, they started identifying target vocabulary before lessons and considering how play activities could provide repeated opportunities for learners to hear, use and reinforce those words. Reflecting on this shift, FT01 explained:

Most of the time we would mention the words during teaching, especially when explaining or

asking questions, but we did not usually write the vocabulary clearly in the lesson objectives or lesson plan. We mainly focused on the content to be covered. During the discussions, I realised that if the vocabulary is not planned for intentionally, it becomes difficult to keep revisiting it during the activities or even to check whether the learners are actually using and understanding the words. (FT01)

This reflection demonstrates a shift in teachers' pedagogical reasoning from treating vocabulary as language that would emerge naturally during classroom interaction to recognising it as an explicit learning outcome requiring purposeful planning and reinforcement. This finding resonates with Li and Kangas (2024), whose systematic review highlights the multiple pedagogical roles teachers undertake in playful learning, including planning, facilitating and assessing learning experiences. It also supports established vocabulary scholarship emphasising purposeful word selection, repeated exposure and opportunities to use new vocabulary in meaningful contexts (Beck et al., 2013; Nation, 2013). In the present study, therefore, increasing intentionality involved teachers making more explicit connections between the vocabulary to be developed and the playful experiences through which learners would encounter and use it.

Classroom observations showed that teachers initially translated this emerging understanding into classroom practice more quickly than into their written lesson plans. Songs, rhymes, games, movement activities and oral questioning were increasingly used to reinforce target vocabulary, although these strategies were not always fully documented in lesson plans. This suggests that pedagogical change initially emerged through experimentation in classroom practice before becoming consistently represented in formal planning documents. Such experimentation is important in the development of PBP because teachers must make pedagogical decisions about how playful experiences can be structured around particular learning purposes rather than simply introduce additional activities into lessons (Li & Kangas, 2024; Li et al., 2025).

However, intentional planning for vocabulary through play remained challenging, particularly when teachers attempted to apply PBP across different curriculum areas. MT02, for example, described difficulties identifying appropriate activities for Mathematics:

For subjects like mathematics, I have got stuck thinking about play activities to use in my lessons, and sometimes I cannot find any. Even when I spend time trying to think of which activities I can use, I don't get what I consider practical for my class. Teaching mathematics is difficult and if I add other things like play... I

end up going back to my usual teaching methods. (MT02)

MT02's experience demonstrates that the development of pedagogical intentionality was neither immediate nor uniform. Teachers were beginning to consider the relationship between vocabulary objectives and playful activities but continued to experience difficulties translating this understanding into feasible instructional designs across curriculum areas. Recent research similarly emphasises that teachers require pedagogical support to move from recognising the value of playful learning to designing and implementing activities that remain aligned with intended learning outcomes. Li et al. (2025), for example, foreground teachers' pedagogical design decisions in connecting playful language-learning experiences with instructional purposes. Nesbitt et al. (2025) likewise demonstrate the relevance of practice-oriented professional support in helping teachers implement active playful learning while maintaining attention to learning goals and curriculum expectations.

Nevertheless, evidence from subsequent lesson observations indicated progressive change. Teachers increasingly identified target vocabulary before instruction and deliberately incorporated opportunities for learners to pronounce, discuss and apply new words through songs, games, storytelling, role play, movement and collaborative activities. Vocabulary-focused planning also extended beyond English lessons into other curriculum areas. In Mathematics, for example, teachers intentionally emphasised terms such as *multiply*, *groups*, *product* and *number sentence* during classroom interaction.

Importantly, teachers also became increasingly critical of whether the activities they selected actually supported the intended vocabulary. FT02 reflected:

Oftentimes we include songs and games, but we don't always think deeply about how they connect to the exact words learners are supposed to learn and the content of the day. We are still learning how to make the play support the vocabulary directly. (FT02)

FT02's reflection illustrates an important development in teachers' professional learning: the presence of a playful activity was no longer regarded as sufficient evidence of effective PBP. Instead, teachers increasingly interrogated the pedagogical relationship between the activity, the vocabulary objective and the intended learning outcome. This finding is consistent with recent scholarship that positions teachers' pedagogical decision-making and intentional design as central to purposeful playful learning (Li & Kangas, 2024; Li et al., 2025). It also corresponds with recent evidence that strengthening learning through play requires professional learning approaches that support teachers to

translate pedagogical principles into classroom practice rather than merely expand their repertoire of activities (Eberhart et al., 2025).

The findings demonstrate a progressive shift from planning primarily for curriculum content and learner engagement towards planning that more deliberately connected vocabulary objectives, playful activities and opportunities for meaningful vocabulary use. However, teachers' continuing difficulties in designing appropriate activities across subjects indicate that this development remained an ongoing process. Intentional vocabulary-focused planning therefore emerged not as a technique acquired at a single point in the intervention, but as a pedagogical capacity that teachers progressively developed through planning, classroom experimentation and reflection.

4.2 Purposeful Vocabulary-Focused Implementation

As teachers became more intentional in their planning, changes were also evident in classroom implementation. Teachers increasingly moved beyond evaluating playful lessons primarily in terms of learner enjoyment, participation and classroom activity to considering whether the activities actually supported vocabulary learning. Through classroom experimentation and reflection, they began to examine whether learners had opportunities to hear, pronounce, understand, revisit and use the intended vocabulary. FT02 reflected:

I am now trying more activities in my class, and I can see that the learners enjoy them and participate actively. However, sometimes I realise that after the excitement of the game or song, I do not spend enough time discussing the vocabulary itself. The learners remember the activity and enjoy taking part, but I have started asking myself whether they are also understanding and using the words I intended them to learn. Through the training and discussions, I have come to realise that the activity alone is not enough. I need to think more carefully about how the vocabulary will be introduced, revisited, and used throughout the lesson so that the play activity supports the learning objective. (FT02)

This reflection demonstrates an important shift in pedagogical reasoning. Learner enthusiasm was no longer regarded as sufficient evidence that a playful activity had achieved its instructional purpose. Instead, teachers increasingly considered how their facilitation could connect participation to intended vocabulary outcomes. This finding resonates with Li and Kangas (2024), whose systematic review identifies teachers as playing multiple pedagogical roles in playful learning, including planning, facilitating, supervising and

assessing learners' progress. Recent research in English-language learning similarly emphasises that systematic pedagogical design is important in connecting playful activities with intended learning objectives (Li et al., 2025). The present findings extend these arguments to vocabulary instruction by demonstrating how teachers progressively shifted attention from the activity itself towards the language-learning opportunities embedded within it.

A similar change was evident in MT01's reflection on Mathematics. Although playful activities increased attention and participation, the teacher increasingly questioned whether this engagement translated into the intended vocabulary and broader learning outcomes:

The activities help participation, especially in Mathematics where learners easily lose concentration if the lesson is only based on explanations and written work. When we include songs, movement, games, or group activities, learners become more attentive and willing to participate. However, I have realised that keeping learners active is only one part of the lesson. Planning the activities properly and making sure they are clearly connected to the lesson objectives and the vocabulary we want learners to learn still requires more thought and support. Sometimes the activity works well and learners enjoy it, but afterwards I ask myself whether it helped them learn exactly what I intended them to learn. (MT01)

MT01's account further illustrates teachers' developing ability to distinguish engagement from learning. Rather than abandoning playful approaches when difficulties arose, teachers increasingly interrogated the instructional purpose of activities and their alignment with vocabulary and curriculum objectives. This finding is particularly relevant to Li et al. (2025), whose study with primary-school teachers implementing playful learning in English as a foreign language found that teachers valued playful learning but also experienced uncertainty about its systematic pedagogical design. Their findings emphasise careful attention to learning objectives and teachers' pedagogical understanding when integrating playful learning into formal instruction. In the present study, teachers similarly required more than knowledge of playful activities; they needed to consider how those activities could be deliberately structured around vocabulary-learning goals.

Teachers' understanding of vocabulary development also began to extend beyond English and Literacy lessons. MT01 explained:

When we first planned the lessons, I mainly thought about making the learners active. But during the microteaching discussions, I realised

that the activities also needed to help learners use and understand the vocabulary better I was teaching in Mathematics. You know at first I also thought it was not my job to teach the use of words. I always thought that is for English and Literacy teachers. (MT01)

This emerging cross-curricular understanding was reflected in classroom practice. Teachers increasingly redesigned songs, dialogues, stories, role plays, demonstrations, games and movement activities to create more purposeful vocabulary-focused interactions. Greater attention was given to providing repeated opportunities for learners to encounter, pronounce, explain and apply target words. These practices support established vocabulary scholarship emphasising repeated encounters with words and meaningful opportunities for vocabulary use (Beck et al., 2013; Nation, 2013). They also correspond with Li and Kangas's (2024) finding that purposeful playful learning depends on teachers' pedagogical activity across the learning process rather than on the presence of play alone.

Teachers also became more resourceful in adapting PBP to their classroom conditions. Locally available materials, including bottle tops, stones, sticks, flashcards and classroom objects, were incorporated into activities, while peer support, flexible grouping, repetition and movement provided practical ways of facilitating playful interaction in large classes. These adaptations occurred despite continuing constraints related to classroom space, lesson time, curriculum coverage and the school's emphasis on academic performance. FT01 observed, "Sometimes you become caught between completing the work expected and giving enough time for the activities. You want learners to participate, but you also have to finish the lesson." (FT01)

The persistence of these constraints indicates that strengthened implementation did not depend on eliminating the contextual conditions that had previously inhibited PBP. Rather, teachers increasingly learned to negotiate and adapt their practices within them. This finding resonates with Wilinski et al. (2025), whose study of professional development for play-based learning in Tanzania underscores the importance of culturally and contextually relevant professional learning for supporting educators to enact PBP within their educational settings. Their study highlights the importance of professional learning that takes account of contextual realities and creates opportunities for educators to develop their understanding of how play-based approaches can be enacted in practice. Similarly, teachers in the present study worked with familiar activities and locally available materials while progressively adapting PBP to large classes, limited resources and curriculum demands. Context-responsive adaptation therefore emerged as an important component of purposeful implementation.

An additional, though less developed, change concerned assessment. As teachers became more intentional about the vocabulary embedded in playful activities, they increasingly attended to learners' pronunciation, explanations and use of target words during stories, games, role play and classroom dialogue. This represented an emerging shift from viewing assessment mainly through written exercises and recall towards recognising evidence of learning within classroom interaction. However, teachers continued to experience difficulty documenting such evidence within established assessment expectations. Assessment should therefore be understood as an area of emerging rather than fully developed pedagogical change. This interpretation is consistent with Li and Kangas (2024), who identify assessment as one of the pedagogical activities through which teachers support and evaluate playful learning.

Overall, the findings demonstrate a progression from activity-focused implementation towards purposeful vocabulary-focused implementation. Teachers increasingly evaluated playful activities not simply according to whether learners enjoyed or participated in them, but according to whether the activities created meaningful opportunities to encounter, understand and use intended vocabulary. At the same time, continuing difficulties with activity design, assessment, time and curriculum demands indicate that this transformation remained developmental rather than complete. Purposeful implementation therefore emerged through teachers' continuing experimentation with how PBP could be adapted to achieve vocabulary-learning objectives within the realities of their classrooms.

4.3 Collaborative Reflection and Lesson Redesign

Collaborative reflection, lesson redesign, microteaching and peer feedback emerged as important mechanisms through which teachers strengthened their integration of PBP into vocabulary instruction. Following classroom implementation, teachers examined their experiences, discussed observation findings, identified successes and challenges, and considered how subsequent lessons could be improved. These discussions encouraged teachers to interrogate the relationship between learner engagement, vocabulary development, lesson objectives and classroom interaction. Reflection therefore became more than an opportunity to review completed lessons; it provided evidence that informed subsequent pedagogical decisions.

The collaborative process also influenced how teachers approached lesson planning. Rather than treating lesson plans primarily as fixed administrative documents, teachers increasingly viewed planning as an iterative pedagogical process that could be revised in response to classroom experience and professional feedback. They revisited lessons to make vocabulary objectives more

explicit, reconsider the sequencing of activities and strengthen the alignment between playful activities and intended learning. FT02 explained:

Now I am beginning to think very differently about the activities. I see my lesson planning has really improved. Before, I mainly wanted learners to enjoy the lesson. But now I am also asking myself whether the activity is helping me teach the vocabulary properly. (FT02)

FT02's reflection demonstrates how collaborative inquiry contributed to a change in the criteria teachers used to evaluate their instructional decisions. Enjoyment remained important, but teachers increasingly considered whether activities served an identifiable pedagogical purpose. This finding is consistent with recent scholarship emphasising that strengthening learning through play requires professional learning that develops teachers' capacity to translate PBP principles into purposeful classroom practice. Eberhart et al. (2025), in their scoping review of teacher-training programmes for learning through play, identified approaches that included theoretical learning, modelling, opportunities for teachers to design and try playful activities, and collaborative discussion. The present findings similarly suggest that professional learning became particularly meaningful when teachers could connect pedagogical ideas to the design and examination of their own lessons.

Microteaching provided an important setting for this process. Teachers could test revised lesson designs, observe colleagues' demonstrations and receive feedback on the relationship between vocabulary objectives and playful activities before transferring ideas into classroom practice. FT01 explained,

Teaching the lesson to fellow teachers helped me realise where the play activities were connecting well with the vocabulary and where I needed to improve. The feedback helped me think more carefully about how each activity supports the lesson objective. (FT01)

Peer feedback also exposed instances in which activities were engaging but insufficiently connected to lesson content or vocabulary objectives. FT02 observed, "The peer feedback was helpful because my colleagues pointed out areas where the play activity was interesting but not clearly linked to the lesson content. After revising the lesson, the activities became more organised and purposeful." (FT02)

These experiences demonstrate that teachers' professional learning was socially and practice-oriented. Teachers did not merely receive feedback from the researcher; they examined one another's pedagogical choices, generated alternatives and collectively considered how playful activities could be strengthened.

This finding resonates with Wilinski et al. (2025), whose work on professional development for play-based learning in Tanzania highlights active learning, opportunities to try new practices, reflection and professional learning communities as important features of professional learning for PBP. It also corresponds with broader evidence that sustained professional development is more likely to influence classroom practice when teachers engage actively and collaboratively with problems arising from their own instructional contexts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Importantly, peer dialogue encouraged teachers to articulate the reasoning underlying their instructional choices. FT01 described how questions from colleagues prompted reconsideration of both the learning objective and the selected activity:

Before the microteaching, I would mainly think about the topic and the activity I wanted learners to do. But during the discussions, I realised that every activity needs to help achieve a specific objective. The feedback helped me see that songs, games, and role play should not just be enjoyable; they should also help learners understand and use the vocabulary we want them to learn. When I presented my lesson, my colleagues asked me how the activity was helping learners achieve the objective. That discussion made me go back and revise both the objective and the activity. (FT01)

This extract illustrates an important mechanism of pedagogical change: teachers were required not only to select instructional activities but also to explain, examine and revise the pedagogical reasoning behind those choices. Recent research on professional support for playful learning similarly indicates the value of practice-oriented support that enables teachers to experiment with implementation and refine their pedagogical decisions (Nesbitt et al., 2025). In the present study, microteaching and peer critique created a relatively immediate connection between professional learning and teachers' classroom practice.

The iterative character of PAR was particularly important to this process. Insights generated through implementation and observation informed reflection, while reflection subsequently influenced lesson redesign and further classroom experimentation. This recursive movement reflects the planning, action, observation and reflection processes associated with participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Kemmis et al., 2014). It also corresponds with Schön's (1983) conception of reflective practice, in which practitioners interrogate experience and use emerging understandings to inform subsequent action. Rather than pedagogical change resulting from a single training event, teachers

had repeated opportunities across the four PAR cycles to examine and refine their practice.

The findings therefore indicate that collaborative reflection and lesson redesign were not supplementary components of the intervention; they were central mechanisms through which pedagogical change occurred. Teachers progressed through an iterative process of planning, classroom experimentation, observation, reflection, peer feedback and redesign, progressively strengthening the alignment among vocabulary objectives, playful activities and learner interaction. This supports a conception of teacher professional learning as sustained, collaborative and embedded in classroom practice rather than as the transmission of prescribed teaching techniques. In this study, PAR provided the structure through which teachers became active participants in examining and progressively strengthening their own integration of PBP.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that teachers progressively moved from using play primarily to promote enjoyment and participation towards integrating it more intentionally into English vocabulary instruction. This change was reflected in more deliberate identification of target vocabulary, stronger alignment between playful activities and learning objectives, and increased attention to whether learners encountered, understood and used the intended vocabulary during classroom interaction.

Importantly, pedagogical change was not achieved simply by introducing teachers to additional playful activities. Rather, it developed through an iterative process of collaborative planning, classroom experimentation, observation, reflection, microteaching, peer feedback and lesson redesign. These processes enabled teachers to interrogate their instructional decisions and progressively adapt PBP to curriculum expectations and classroom realities. However, challenges related to activity design, assessment, large classes, limited resources, instructional time and curriculum coverage remained, indicating that strengthening PBP is an ongoing process requiring sustained professional support.

Effective integration of PBP into vocabulary instruction therefore depends not only on teachers' knowledge of playful strategies but also on their capacity to make intentional, reflective and context-responsive pedagogical decisions. PAR provided a structured process through which teachers could collaboratively examine, test and progressively refine these decisions within their own classroom practice.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. Teacher education institutions and professional-development providers should move beyond one-off training in playful activities and provide sustained, practice-based professional learning that incorporates collaborative planning, classroom experimentation, observation, reflection and lesson redesign.
2. Schools and school leaders should create regular opportunities for teachers to engage in collaborative lesson planning, microteaching, peer observation and professional reflection to strengthen the alignment between playful activities and intended learning outcomes.
3. Curriculum and teacher-support institutions should provide practical guidance and context-responsive examples demonstrating how PBP can be integrated purposefully into vocabulary instruction across curriculum areas, including approaches that are feasible in large classes and resource-constrained settings.
4. Further professional support should strengthen teachers' capacity to assess vocabulary learning within playful classroom interactions, particularly how evidence from learners' oral language use, participation and application of target vocabulary can be documented and used to inform subsequent instructions.

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