



Pedagogical Gaps in Teachers' Implementation of Play-Based Pedagogy for English Vocabulary Instruction: Evidence from a Ugandan Lower Primary School

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Abstract: *Play-Based Pedagogy (PBP) is increasingly recognised as an approach for supporting children's language development through meaningful and interactive learning experiences. In Uganda, the lower primary thematic curriculum promotes learner-centred approaches; however, translating these expectations into purposeful classroom practice remains challenging. This study examined the pedagogical gaps in Primary Three teachers' use of PBP for English vocabulary instruction in a primary school in Kampala District, Uganda. The study adopted a qualitative Participatory Action Research design and reports diagnostic evidence generated before a professional learning intervention. Four Primary Three teachers were purposively selected. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, document analysis and a researcher reflection journal and analysed thematically. The findings revealed four interrelated pedagogical gaps: limited conceptual and pedagogical understanding of PBP; limited integration of PBP into vocabulary instruction; limited assessment of learning within PBP; and limited access to materials supporting PBP. Teachers commonly used songs, games and energisers to promote participation and manage classrooms rather than intentionally connecting them to vocabulary-learning objectives. Playful activities were not consistently planned to support meaningful vocabulary use, while assessment remained largely associated with written evidence and marks. The findings align with Sociocultural Theory and the Input Hypothesis, highlighting the importance of scaffolding, learner interaction and meaningful, comprehensible language exposure in vocabulary development. The study concludes that the presence of playful activities does not necessarily constitute purposeful PBP and recommends strengthening teachers' pedagogical capacity to intentionally plan, facilitate and assess vocabulary learning through play.*

Keywords: *Play-Based Pedagogy; English Vocabulary; Teacher Practices; Lower Primary Education; Uganda*

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary development is a fundamental component of children's language acquisition, literacy development and academic achievement (Snow, 2006; Laufer, 2012; McLeod et al., 2017; Butler, 2019). Vocabulary knowledge supports learners' ability to comprehend texts, communicate effectively, express ideas and participate meaningfully in classroom learning (Alabsi, 2016; Butler, 2019; Masters et al., 2023). During the

early years of schooling, vocabulary provides an important foundation for oral language, reading comprehension and writing, with children's early vocabulary knowledge associated with later literacy achievement (Han et al., 2010; McLeod et al., 2017; Masters et al., 2023). For learners acquiring English as a Second Language (ESL), vocabulary is particularly important because lexical knowledge influences their ability to understand classroom instruction and

communicate across learning contexts (Alabsi, 2016; Shehadeh & Farrah, 2016).

The effectiveness of vocabulary instruction depends not only on the number of words introduced but also on the pedagogical approaches through which learners encounter, practise and apply new vocabulary (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Sparapani et al., 2018). Traditional approaches that emphasise repetition, memorisation and isolated word drills may provide limited opportunities for learners to construct meaning and apply vocabulary in authentic communicative contexts (Laufer, 2012; Alabsi, 2016). In contrast, vocabulary development is strengthened when learners repeatedly encounter and use language through meaningful, socially interactive and contextually rich experiences (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020; Masters et al., 2023).

Play-Based Pedagogy provides one such approach. PBP integrates playful learning experiences with educational objectives, enabling children to explore ideas, negotiate meaning, solve problems and communicate through socially interactive experiences (Weisberg et al., 2013; LEGO Foundation, 2018; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020). Through activities such as storytelling, role play, songs, games and guided exploration, learners can encounter and use vocabulary within meaningful contexts rather than as isolated lexical items. However, the educational value of play depends on teachers' ability to plan, facilitate, scaffold and assess learning intentionally. Limited pedagogical understanding may result in play being used primarily for entertainment, classroom management or learner motivation rather than as a purposeful strategy for vocabulary development (Ezati & Odele, 2022; Parker et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2024).

In Uganda, curriculum reforms have increasingly promoted learner-centred approaches in early childhood and lower primary education. The Early Childhood Development Policy and Primary School Thematic Curriculum advocate songs, games, storytelling, role play, dramatisation, drawing and collaborative learning to promote children's holistic development and foundational literacy (Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2007; National Curriculum Development Centre [NCDC], 2007). Within the Thematic Curriculum, vocabulary development is expected to occur through meaningful classroom interaction, with teachers introducing new vocabulary within familiar themes and providing repeated opportunities for learners to use language through songs, stories, games, discussions and practical activities (NCDC, 2007). These expectations are particularly important because English becomes the language of instruction from Primary Four onwards, making vocabulary development during the lower primary years critical for learners' subsequent literacy and academic participation.

Despite these curriculum expectations, translating PBP into effective classroom practice remains challenging. Studies in Uganda indicate that many lower primary

classrooms continue to be characterised by teacher-directed instruction, memorisation, chorus responses, copying from the blackboard and examination-oriented practices that provide limited opportunities for meaningful learner interaction and contextualised vocabulary development (Ssentanda & Andema, 2019; Mendenhall et al., 2021; Ezati & Odele, 2022). Teachers may acknowledge the value of play while experiencing difficulties translating curriculum expectations into purposeful classroom practice because of limited pedagogical preparation, inadequate professional support, uncertainty about instructional strategies and contextual constraints (Dzamesi & van Heerden, 2020; Parker et al., 2022).

1.1 Problem Statement

Although PBP is promoted within Uganda's lower primary curriculum and has recognised potential for supporting children's language and vocabulary development, its presence in curriculum policy does not necessarily translate into purposeful classroom implementation. Existing studies have identified barriers such as limited teacher preparation, inadequate instructional resources, large classes and curriculum pressures (Mendenhall et al., 2021; Parker et al., 2022). However, these explanations provide limited insight into the pedagogical gaps within teachers' actual implementation of PBP for vocabulary instruction.

In particular, limited classroom-based evidence exists on how lower primary teachers understand PBP and how this understanding is reflected in their planning, integration of vocabulary within play, facilitation of language-rich interactions and assessment of vocabulary learning. This distinction is important because the presence of songs, games, role play or other playful activities does not in itself constitute effective PBP. Their pedagogical value depends on whether teachers intentionally connect them to learning objectives and use them to support learners' vocabulary development. Without evidence on these dimensions of teachers' practice, efforts to strengthen PBP risk focusing on the provision of activities or materials rather than addressing the pedagogical knowledge and instructional practices required for purposeful implementation.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to establish the pedagogical gaps in Primary Three teachers' use of Play-Based Pedagogy for English vocabulary instruction in a selected primary school in Kampala District, Uganda.

1.3 Research Question

The study was guided by the following research question: What pedagogical gaps characterise Primary Three teachers' use of Play-Based Pedagogy for English vocabulary instruction in the selected primary school?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study was informed by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which provide complementary perspectives for understanding how PBP can support English vocabulary development. Sociocultural Theory conceptualises learning as a socially mediated process in which children construct knowledge through interaction with more knowledgeable others, including teachers and peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Central to the theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which describes the difference between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with appropriate guidance and support. Within this process, teachers facilitate learning through scaffolding, including modelling, questioning, prompting, feedback and gradually transferring responsibility to learners (Bruner, 1983; Wood et al., 1976).

Play is particularly relevant to Sociocultural Theory because it creates opportunities for children to interact, negotiate meaning, experiment with language and operate beyond their current level of development (Vygotsky, 1978; Bodrova & Leong, 2015). Within purposeful play, teachers can introduce and model new vocabulary, extend children's responses, ask questions and support learners to use language in meaningful social contexts. From this perspective, the educational value of PBP lies not merely in children's participation in playful activities but in the quality of interaction and scaffolding through which those activities support learning. Sociocultural Theory therefore provided a basis for examining how teachers facilitated, scaffolded and supported vocabulary learning during play.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) complements this perspective by emphasising the importance of comprehensible input in language acquisition. The theory proposes that language develops when learners encounter meaningful input that is understandable but slightly beyond their current level of linguistic competence ($i + 1$). Comprehension can be supported through context, gestures, visual materials, demonstrations, actions and interaction, enabling learners to infer meaning and gradually extend their linguistic competence. Language acquisition is therefore strengthened through repeated exposure to meaningful language rather than reliance on isolated memorisation and drills.

PBP can provide such conditions through storytelling, songs, games, role play and guided exploration in which vocabulary is encountered and used within meaningful contexts (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020). These activities can provide repeated vocabulary

exposure while creating opportunities for children to listen, respond and use newly acquired words during interaction. Krashen's Input Hypothesis therefore informed examination of how teachers introduced and contextualised vocabulary and created opportunities for meaningful language use during PBP.

The two theories enabled the study to examine both the social-interactive and language-learning dimensions of PBP. Sociocultural Theory directed attention to teacher facilitation, scaffolding and learner interaction, while the Input Hypothesis focused attention on meaningful and comprehensible vocabulary exposure. They therefore provided a framework for examining whether teachers' use of PBP created purposeful opportunities for English vocabulary development.

2.2 Empirical Review

Research increasingly recognises PBP as an approach through which young children can develop language and vocabulary within meaningful and interactive learning experiences. Play enables learners to encounter new words, connect them to objects and actions, negotiate meaning and use language in communicative contexts (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020). However, play does not automatically produce learning; its educational value depends on how teachers intentionally plan, facilitate and assess playful experiences in relation to learning objectives. Recent systematic evidence similarly identifies planning, facilitation and assessment as central dimensions of teachers' pedagogical activity in playful learning (Li & Kangas, 2024).

Teachers' conceptual and pedagogical understanding of PBP is therefore central to implementation. Teachers who understand the pedagogical principles underpinning play are better positioned to connect playful activities to curriculum objectives and facilitate meaningful learning (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Pyle et al., 2024). Recent Ugandan evidence reinforces this concern. Ngalonsa et al. (2024) found considerable variation in teachers' competence in implementing learning through play, including instances where play was conducted without a predetermined pedagogical purpose. Teachers who had received continuous professional-development support demonstrated stronger implementation than those who had not.

Purposeful PBP also requires intentional planning and integration. Teachers need to identify learning objectives and design play experiences that enable learners to encounter, practise and apply new knowledge. Li and Kangas (2024), in a systematic review of 21 empirical studies in primary education, identified planning, orientation, playing and elaboration as interconnected phases of teachers' pedagogical activity, with teachers assuming important roles in facilitating and assessing

learning. More recent research with primary-school English teachers similarly indicates that teachers can value playful learning while experiencing uncertainty about how to design it systematically and connect it to instructional purposes (Li et al., 2025).

For vocabulary instruction, intentionality requires identifying target words and creating repeated opportunities for learners to encounter and use them in meaningful contexts (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Alabsi, 2016). Playful and guided-learning approaches can create such opportunities by linking language to actions, interaction and contextualised experiences. Recent research on playful English-language learning further underscores the importance of pedagogical design rather than treating playful activities as inherently educational (Li et al., 2025).

Effective PBP further depends on teacher facilitation and scaffolding. Teachers can extend learning through modelling, questioning, prompting explanations and encouraging interaction among learners (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020). Recent research on guided play similarly conceptualises effective playful learning as a balance between learner agency, active teacher facilitation and clearly defined learning goals (Nesbitt et al., 2025). Such interactions are particularly important for vocabulary learning because they enable children to connect new words with prior knowledge, negotiate meaning and apply language in context.

Formative assessment is another important dimension of purposeful PBP. Observation, dialogue, questioning and feedback during play can help teachers identify learners' understanding and adjust instructional support as learning unfolds (Danniels & Pyle, 2018). Li and Kangas's (2024) review similarly identifies assessment of learners' progress as part of teachers' pedagogical role throughout playful learning. However, assessment within play can be difficult where teachers lack clear pedagogical guidance on how learning should be observed and documented.

Teachers' implementation of PBP is also shaped by contextual and professional conditions. Large classes, limited instructional materials, curriculum demands, examination pressures and inadequate professional support can constrain play-based instruction (Mendenhall et al., 2021; Ezati & Odele, 2022). Nevertheless, structural conditions alone do not fully explain differences in practice. Ngalonsa et al. (2024), for example, found differing levels of implementation among Ugandan teachers and identified professional-development support as an important distinguishing factor. A 2025 scoping review of 45 teacher-training studies similarly found that conceptual clarity, training content and professional-support approaches such as workshops, coaching and mentoring were important

features of programmes intended to strengthen teachers' implementation of play-based learning (Eberhart et al., 2025).

Within Uganda, this issue is particularly significant because lower primary curriculum reforms promote learner-centred approaches including songs, games, storytelling, role play and other interactive experiences. Yet existing studies point to continuing challenges in translating such expectations into purposeful classroom practice (Mendenhall et al., 2021; Ezati & Odele, 2022; Ngalonsa et al., 2024). Although recent research has strengthened understanding of teacher competence and the pedagogical requirements of learning through play, there remains limited classroom-based evidence examining how specific pedagogical gaps are manifested in teachers' use of PBP for English vocabulary instruction in Ugandan lower primary classrooms.

The present study addresses this gap by examining teachers' actual implementation of PBP for English vocabulary instruction, focusing on how conceptual understanding, intentional planning and integration, facilitation, assessment and instructional conditions shaped classroom practice

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative Participatory Action Research (PAR) design to examine teachers' implementation of Play-Based Pedagogy (PBP) for English vocabulary instruction in a selected lower primary school in Kampala District, Uganda. PAR was appropriate because it enabled teachers and the researcher to collaboratively examine classroom practice, identify pedagogical challenges and generate evidence to inform instructional improvement (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Burns, 2010; McNiff, 2017). The broader study involved iterative cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection aimed at strengthening teachers' use of PBP. This article reports specifically on the diagnostic evidence generated before the professional learning intervention, focusing on the pedagogical gaps that characterised teachers' existing use of PBP for English vocabulary instruction.

The study was conducted in one purposively selected private primary school in Kampala District, Uganda. Four Primary Three teachers, two female and two male, were purposively selected because the study focused on English vocabulary instruction at this level. Primary Three is the final year of Uganda's lower primary cycle before learners transition to Primary Four, where English becomes the language of instruction. Their classes ranged from approximately 45 to 60 learners. Participants were identified as FT01 and FT02 (female teachers) and MT01 and MT02 (male teachers). Institutional permission and informed consent were

obtained, participation was voluntary, and participant codes were used to protect confidentiality.

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, document analysis and a researcher reflection journal. Interviews explored teachers' understanding of PBP, experiences of using play in English vocabulary instruction, implementation challenges and professional learning needs. Classroom observations examined the integration of vocabulary objectives into playful activities, teacher facilitation and scaffolding, learner interaction, vocabulary use and formative assessment. Document analysis of lesson plans, schemes of work, learners' exercise books and assessment records examined alignment among vocabulary objectives, play-based activities, assessment and classroom implementation. The researcher reflection journal documented observations, emerging insights and methodological decisions and supported researcher reflexivity. Evidence across the four data sources was triangulated to compare teachers' reported understanding with instructional planning and observed classroom practices.

Data were analysed thematically using deductive and inductive coding, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Deductive coding was informed by the research question and key dimensions of purposeful PBP identified in the literature, including teachers' understanding of PBP, integration of vocabulary within play, alignment with learning objectives, facilitation and scaffolding, and assessment of vocabulary learning. Inductive coding was used concurrently to identify additional patterns emerging from the data. Comparison of codes across data sources produced four interrelated pedagogical gaps: limited conceptual and pedagogical understanding of PBP, limited integration of PBP into classroom practice for vocabulary development, limited assessment of learning within PBP, and limited access to materials supporting PBP.

4. Results and Discussion

The diagnostic analysis identified four interrelated gaps in teachers' implementation of PBP for English vocabulary instruction: limited conceptual and pedagogical understanding of PBP; limited integration of PBP into classroom practice for vocabulary development; limited assessment of learning within PBP; and limited access to materials supporting PBP. These findings were evident through teacher interviews, classroom observations, instructional documents and researcher reflections.

4.1 Limited Conceptual and Pedagogical Understanding of PBP

The findings revealed that teachers had limited conceptual and pedagogical understanding of PBP, particularly in relation to its use for vocabulary development. Although teachers were familiar with play and incorporated activities such as songs, chants, games and energisers into their lessons, these were largely associated with learner enjoyment, participation and classroom management rather than with the intentional teaching and learning of vocabulary. MT02 explained:

To be honest, I don't really know what PBP is but I know play not play based pedagogy though I can connect the dots to guess the meaning; I have just heard the term mentioned here. What I know is games in class. Most times, I teach learners songs, do chants, or use energisers when learners lose focus. I mainly use those things to manage the class, not really to teach vocabulary. (MT02)

This account shows that familiarity with playful classroom activities did not necessarily translate into an understanding of PBP as a pedagogical approach. A similar distinction emerged in teachers' perceptions of the relationship between play and formal learning. 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." (FT02)

Classroom observations and document analysis reflected these understandings. Teachers incorporated playful activities into some lessons, but these were not consistently connected to vocabulary-learning objectives. Lesson plans, for example, included activities such as songs and games without clearly identifying the vocabulary to be developed through the activities or indicating how learners would encounter, practise and use the target words. Play was therefore present in classroom practice, but its pedagogical connection to vocabulary development was not always evident.

Teachers' accounts further indicated uncertainty about how to translate their general familiarity with play into planned vocabulary instruction. FT01 described her understanding as follows:

I only have a faint idea of what PBP really involves. It is a teaching approach to make learning interactive, fun and enjoyable..., but not in a structured way to teach vocabulary... none of us has been properly trained on how to use play-based methods for vocabulary development. (FT01)

This uncertainty was also reflected in teachers' accounts of their preservice training. FT02 stated: "We were not taught how to plan lessons with play. Even in college, we

just used schemes and syllabi. No one told us how to teach through play.” (FT02)

The interview, observation and document evidence showed that teachers recognised and used different forms of play but had limited pedagogical understanding of how these could be intentionally planned and facilitated to support vocabulary development. The gap therefore concerned not the absence of play in teachers’ practice, but limited understanding of how play could function as a purposeful approach to vocabulary instruction.

4.2 Limited Integration of PBP into Classroom Practice for Vocabulary Development

Classroom observations and document analysis revealed limited integration of PBP into vocabulary instruction. Although teachers incorporated songs, games, movement and other playful activities into some lessons, these activities were not consistently planned around specific vocabulary-learning objectives. In several instances, play occurred alongside instruction rather than functioning as an integral part of the process through which learners encountered, practised and used new vocabulary.

This was evident during MT01’s mathematics lesson, where the target vocabulary included *grouping*, *multiply* and *multiplication*. The teacher introduced a number song accompanied by body movements, which generated considerable learner participation. However, the activity was not explicitly connected to the target vocabulary, nor was it followed by opportunities for learners to use the words through the playful activity. Similarly, during FT02’s English lesson, learners participated in “*Row, Row, Row Your Boat*,” body spelling of words such as *feeds*, *makes*, *teaches* and *cries*, and another song. While these activities generated active participation, only the opening song appeared in the lesson plan, and the vocabulary activities were not systematically planned to support learners’ understanding and use of the target words. These classroom examples showed a disconnect between the presence of playful activities and their intentional integration into vocabulary learning. Teachers themselves recognised the difficulty of making this connection. The mathematics teacher shared:

I really want to use play in my lessons because I know it can make learning more fun and engaging for my learners. The challenge is that I am not sure how to design these activities in a way that guarantees they will actually learn and remember the words I am teaching. (MT01)

The difficulty was also apparent in instructional planning. Lesson plans tended to identify songs or games as activities without consistently showing how these

would be used to introduce, contextualise, practise or reinforce vocabulary. Some playful activities observed during lessons had not been planned beforehand but were introduced spontaneously during teaching. FT01 reflected on this challenge after one of the observed lessons:

We want to be more creative, but it is hard to plan those kinds of lessons after a long day or on top of all the other things we do. So, we just use what’s available, even when it’s not the best. (FT01)

Classroom observations further showed that the integration challenge extended to how play was facilitated. Even when playful activities were introduced, teachers largely retained control of the learning process. Learners typically followed instructions, responded collectively or reproduced teacher-modelled language, with fewer opportunities to explore word meanings, use new vocabulary with peers or make language choices during play. For example, in MT02’s science lesson on weather instruments, the teacher demonstrated the operation of a windsock by blowing into a polythene bag. Although the demonstration provided a concrete illustration, learners observed rather than handling the material themselves and using the associated vocabulary through interaction.

The triangulated evidence showed that teachers were able and willing to introduce playful activities, but experienced difficulty integrating them purposefully into the vocabulary-learning process. The gap was particularly evident in the alignment of play with vocabulary objectives, planning for meaningful use of target words, and creating opportunities for learners to interact with vocabulary during playful experiences.

4.3 Limited Assessment of Learning within PBP

Assessment emerged as a further gap in teachers’ implementation of PBP for vocabulary instruction. Although teachers assessed learners through oral questioning, written exercises and tests, they were less certain about how learning demonstrated during play could be observed, assessed and documented. Assessment was strongly associated with written evidence and marks, while learners’ oral language use and interactions during playful activities were less readily recognised as evidence of learning. One teacher described this uncertainty: “Sometimes the children are learning as they play, but you keep asking yourself whether just observing them during play can really count as assessment.” (MT02). This concern was also linked to expectations about how learning should be demonstrated. MT01 explained, “During play, children may learn a lot, but when it comes to assessment, you are expected to show marks. Play does not give you marks.” (MT01).

Classroom observations reflected these perceptions. During songs, games and other interactive activities, teachers generally monitored whether learners participated, responded to instructions or completed the activity. There was less evidence of deliberate observation of how learners understood or used the target vocabulary during play. Opportunities to probe word meanings, identify learners experiencing difficulty or provide immediate feedback on vocabulary use were therefore limited.

Document analysis showed a similar pattern. Lesson plans rarely specified how teachers would assess vocabulary learning during playful activities. Assessment was more commonly represented through written exercises, oral questioning and other tasks conducted during or after instruction. Criteria for observing learners' oral use of vocabulary, interaction with peers or application of new words during play were generally absent from the plans. Teachers' accounts also indicated that these practices were influenced by established school expectations regarding assessment. FT02 explained:

Our Director of Studies normally expects written work and tests because that is what is commonly used to show that learning has taken place. Sometimes it becomes difficult to know how play activities can also be assessed and recorded in a way that meets those expectations. (FT02)

The evidence showed that assessment was not absent from teachers' practice. Rather, the gap concerned teachers' limited use of assessment within play as part of the learning process. Learners' vocabulary use during playful interactions was not systematically observed or documented, limiting opportunities for teachers to use emerging evidence of learning to provide feedback and adjust instruction.

4.4 Limited Access to Materials Supporting PBP

Limited access to appropriate instructional materials was another gap identified in teachers' implementation of PBP. Classroom observations showed that teachers relied largely on chalkboards, textbooks, lesson notes and oral instruction, with relatively limited use of manipulatives, visual aids, role-play materials and other resources that could support playful vocabulary-learning experiences.

Teachers also relied on commercially prepared lesson notes to guide their teaching. While these provided instructional content, they offered limited flexibility for designing and adapting playful activities around particular vocabulary-learning needs. During a group discussion, teachers linked their reliance on existing

resources to what was available within the school, "Maybe the school does not have enough resources, so we mainly depend on the materials we already have."

The material constraint was also evident in classroom practice. Where teachers attempted to make lessons more interactive, they often worked with readily available resources rather than materials specifically selected or developed to support vocabulary learning through play. For example, during the observed science lesson on weather instruments, MT02 improvised a demonstration of a windsock using a polythene bag. Although this provided learners with a concrete representation of the concept, opportunities for learners to manipulate materials themselves and use the associated vocabulary remained limited.

Therefore, teachers were working within a resource-constrained instructional environment in which materials specifically supporting PBP were not readily available. This limited the range of playful experiences that could be planned and implemented, particularly those requiring learners to manipulate objects, engage in role play or interact with visual and concrete representations of vocabulary.

4.5 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the principal challenge in teachers' implementation of PBP was not the absence of play, but the limited pedagogical intentionality with which it was used to support English vocabulary development. Teachers used songs, games, rhymes and other playful activities, but these were frequently associated with enjoyment, participation and classroom management rather than purposeful vocabulary learning. This finding is consistent with research showing that teachers may value play while experiencing difficulty translating it into intentional pedagogical practice (Parker et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2024).

Purposeful PBP requires alignment between play and explicit learning objectives, with activities deliberately structured to enable learners to encounter, practise and apply new knowledge (Weisberg et al., 2013; Danniels & Pyle, 2018). In this study, songs and games were not consistently linked to specific vocabulary objectives, and classroom implementation remained largely teacher-directed. Learners consequently had fewer opportunities to interact, make language choices and negotiate meaning. Similar tensions between learner-centred pedagogies and teacher-directed practices have been reported in contexts characterised by large classes, curriculum pressures and examination-oriented expectations (Mendenhall et al., 2021; Ezati & Odele, 2022).

These findings are significant from a sociocultural perspective because vocabulary learning is mediated

through interaction and scaffolding within learners' Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). Play can provide opportunities for teachers and peers to model language, question, negotiate meaning and support learners' vocabulary use (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). Where learners primarily reproduce teacher-directed responses, these opportunities are reduced. Strengthening PBP therefore requires not merely a repertoire of playful activities, but the facilitation skills to create interactive and scaffolded vocabulary-learning experiences.

The findings similarly support Krashen's (1982) emphasis on meaningful and comprehensible language input. Songs, games, storytelling and role play can contextualise vocabulary through actions, objects, visual cues and interaction. However, the observed activities did not consistently provide repeated and contextualised exposure to target vocabulary. Weak alignment between playful activities and intended vocabulary therefore constrained their potential to provide meaningful language input.

Assessment presented a related pedagogical challenge. Teachers relied primarily on oral questioning and written exercises and made less systematic use of observation, dialogue and feedback during play. This corresponds with research showing that teachers can experience difficulty assessing learning within PBP when assessment is associated predominantly with formal tasks (Danniels & Pyle, 2018; Parker et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2024). Similarly, limited instructional materials constrained opportunities for learners to manipulate objects, engage in role play and connect vocabulary to concrete experiences, reflecting resource challenges reported in other play-based learning contexts (Mendenhall et al., 2021; Ezati & Odele, 2022). Teachers' attempts to improvise nevertheless suggest that effective implementation depends not only on resource availability but also on teachers' capacity to adapt available materials to learning objectives.

Overall, the findings show that structural constraints alone do not explain the gap between curriculum expectations and classroom implementation. Large classes, curriculum demands and limited resources interacted with gaps in teachers' conceptual understanding, planning, facilitation and assessment. Teachers therefore require pedagogical knowledge and professional support that enable them to adapt PBP to classroom realities rather than simply being encouraged to "use play" (Dzamesi & van Heerden, 2020; Parker et al., 2022). The study thus identifies the central pedagogical gap as one of intentionality and enactment: purposeful PBP depends on teachers' capacity to connect play to vocabulary objectives, facilitate meaningful language interaction and assess learning as it occurs.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the pedagogical gaps in Primary Three teachers' use of PBP for English vocabulary instruction in a selected primary school in Kampala District, Uganda. The findings revealed that the central challenge was not the absence of playful activities in classrooms, but teachers' limited capacity to use play intentionally as a pedagogical approach for vocabulary development. Teachers were familiar with songs, games, rhymes and other playful activities and recognised their value for learner enjoyment and participation. However, these activities were not consistently connected to explicit vocabulary-learning objectives or structured to provide meaningful opportunities for learners to encounter, practise and use new vocabulary. Classroom practice remained largely teacher-directed, limiting opportunities for learner interaction, exploration and scaffolded language use. Formative assessment was also weakly integrated into play, with greater reliance on oral questioning and written exercises after instruction than on observing and supporting vocabulary learning as it occurred. The findings, therefore, highlight a distinction between incorporating play into classroom activities and implementing PBP as an intentional pedagogical approach. Purposeful PBP requires teachers to align play with learning objectives, contextualise vocabulary within meaningful experiences, facilitate and scaffold learner interaction, and use formative assessment to guide instruction. Strengthening these dimensions of teachers' practice is essential if the curriculum's emphasis on play is to translate into meaningful vocabulary-learning opportunities in lower primary classrooms.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the foregoing findings, this study recommends the following:

1. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), teacher education institutions and providers of continuing professional development should move beyond encouraging teachers to include songs, games and other playful activities in their lessons and focus more explicitly on the pedagogical use of play for learning. Professional learning should strengthen teachers' ability to identify vocabulary-learning objectives, select and design appropriate play experiences, contextualise target vocabulary, facilitate learner interaction and assess vocabulary development during play.
2. School leaders and teachers should establish opportunities for collaborative lesson planning, classroom-based reflection and peer learning focused on the purposeful integration of PBP

into vocabulary instruction. These processes should enable teachers to examine the relationship between learning objectives, playful activities, teacher facilitation and evidence of learner understanding.

3. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) and curriculum-development and teacher-support institutions should provide practical guidance and examples showing how playful activities can be connected to specific vocabulary outcomes and adapted to classroom realities such as large classes, limited instructional resources and curriculum demands.
4. School leaders, local education authorities and other education stakeholders should strengthen teachers' access to appropriate, low-cost and locally adaptable materials that support vocabulary learning through play, particularly in resource-constrained classrooms.

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