



Unveiling Chinese EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Implementing a Play-Based Approach to Phonics Instruction

Yating Qu¹, Princess Policarpio²

Abstract

This study explores Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' perspectives on employing a play-based approach in teaching phonics. The case study method will be employed by this study, which is particularly suitable for this research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex, contextualized experiences of Chinese EFL teachers using play-based approaches in phonics instruction. The study captures teachers' perspectives by employing in-depth interviews and classroom observations, thus providing rich, qualitative data that reveals what they do and why and how they integrate play-based methods into their teaching. By analyzing interview and observational data, the study aims to identify significant themes and variations in the teachers' perspectives to enhance phonics learning among their students. Understanding these aspects will provide valuable insights into how play-based learning can effectively adapt to the Chinese EFL context, potentially improving phonics instruction and student outcomes. Finally, the conduct of this study is justified as phonics is essential for developing early reading skills in EFL learners. However, traditional methods may not fully engage students or address their diverse needs. Play-based learning, which emphasizes interactive and enjoyable activities, offers a potential solution by making phonics instruction more engaging and effective.

Keywords: *Play-based learning, Phonics instruction, EFL teachers, Case study.*

A. Introduction

Phonics is a fundamental component of early language education, essential for developing reading and spelling skills in young learners. It involves teaching the relationships between sounds (phonemes) and their corresponding letters or letter combinations (graphemes), which enables children to decode words and read fluently. Research consistently shows that phonics instruction improves early reading skills, including word recognition, pronunciation, and reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000; Ehri et al., 2001). Phonics provides a systematic approach to reading that helps students understand the structure of words, enhancing their ability to tackle unfamiliar words independently. Furthermore, phonics instruction is "crucial in building the foundation for spelling skills, as it helps students connect sounds with letters in a systematic way, making word construction easier" (Armbruster et al., 2001). The importance of phonics is especially pronounced in the early stages of language learning, where it serves as a gateway to literacy, promoting reading fluency and a positive reading attitude. Before introducing play-based learning, it is important to acknowledge that phonics instruction lays the groundwork for literacy and equips students with vital tools for lifelong learning and effective communication. Play-based learning is an educational approach that leverages play as the primary medium for teaching and learning. It is grounded in the understanding that play is a natural and essential part of children's development. It provides a dynamic context for them to

¹ Angeles University Foundation, China. qu.yating@auf.edu.ph

² Angeles University Foundation, China.

explore, experiment, discover, and interact with their environment. In this approach, children engage in enjoyable, meaningful, and often self-directed activities, allowing them to holistically develop cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills (Wood, 2014). Play-based learning emphasizes active engagement, creativity, and integrating learning across different domains through playful experiences. It supports children's intrinsic motivation to learn by allowing them to take the lead, make choices, and navigate their learning journey with guidance and support from educators (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). This approach fosters critical thinking and problem-solving abilities and promotes language development, cooperation, and emotional regulation, making it a valuable strategy in early childhood education.

The integration of play-based learning in the teaching of phonics in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners has garnered increasing attention within the field of language education. This pedagogical approach, which emphasizes interactive, game-like activities to foster language acquisition, is particularly relevant in the context of Chinese EFL classrooms. Here, the traditional, often rigid, language instruction methodologies are increasingly challenged by innovative strategies that enhance learner engagement and phonemic awareness through play. Play-based learning is grounded in the idea that play is a critical component of early childhood education, as it significantly contributes to cognitive, social, and emotional development. For instance, Vygotsky's theory of play highlights the role of play in bridging the gap between what children can achieve independently and what they can achieve with guidance from more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978). This theoretical foundation is crucial for understanding how play can be leveraged to facilitate phonics instruction, making it a vital area of exploration for educators.

In the context of Chinese EFL education, the challenges are manifold. Research indicates that Chinese learners often struggle to master English phonics due to the significant differences between Chinese and English phonetic systems (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). Moreover, the traditional Chinese educational system, which typically emphasizes rote memorization and teacher-centered instruction, may not always provide the most conducive environment for developing phonemic awareness and phonological skills. As such, there is a growing recognition of the need to explore alternative instructional strategies to make phonics instruction more engaging and effective. The play-based approach to teaching phonics holds promise in this regard. Educators can create a more dynamic and motivating learning environment by incorporating play elements, such as games, storytelling, and interactive activities. This approach makes the learning process enjoyable and aligns with contemporary educational theories that advocate for student-centered learning and active engagement (Brown, 2009). Furthermore, studies have shown that play-based learning can enhance language acquisition by providing natural contexts for practice and reinforcement, thus supporting the development of phonemic awareness and other foundational literacy skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2003).

Despite its potential benefits, adopting play-based methods in Chinese EFL classrooms is not without challenges. Teachers' perspectives on this approach are crucial as their beliefs, attitudes, and classroom practices significantly influence the effectiveness of instructional strategies. Therefore, understanding Chinese EFL teachers' perspectives on using play-based methods for teaching phonics is essential for identifying barriers and facilitators to its implementation. Research in this area is still emerging, with few studies specifically addressing Chinese EFL teachers' nuanced views and experiences in this context (Chen, 2018). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the perspectives of Chinese EFL teachers regarding the use of a play-based approach in teaching phonics. Through qualitative interviews and classroom observations, the study seeks to uncover teachers' beliefs, experiences, challenges, and successes related to this pedagogical strategy. Doing so aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of

how play-based methods can be effectively integrated into Chinese EFL classrooms to enhance phonics instruction. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers and contribute to advancing effective and engaging language teaching practices in China and beyond.

The integration of play-based learning in English language teaching, particularly in phonics instruction for Chinese EFL learners, represents a departure from traditional methodologies towards more interactive and engaging educational practices. Phonics Play-based learning, grounded in theories of child development and educational psychology, offers a promising alternative by leveraging activities that are inherently motivating and enjoyable for young learners (Vygotsky, 1978; Brown, 2009). Such approaches not only align with contemporary educational theories advocating for student-centered learning but also provide natural contexts for language practice and application (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Despite these potential benefits, the adoption of play-based methods in Chinese EFL classrooms remains relatively underexplored, particularly from the perspective of educators tasked with implementing these strategies.

Understanding the perspectives of Chinese EFL teachers is crucial as their beliefs, attitudes, and instructional practices significantly influence the success of innovative pedagogical approaches. Previous research indicates that teachers' attitudes towards educational innovation and confidence in new methods can impact their willingness to adopt and effectively implement play-based learning strategies (Chen, 2018). Therefore, exploring teachers' perspectives on using play-based approaches in teaching phonics can provide insights into the barriers and facilitators influencing its integration into Chinese EFL classrooms. This research aims to contribute valuable insights to educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in China and beyond by bridging the gap between theory and practice. The findings are expected to inform the design of professional development programs, curriculum adaptations, and policy recommendations to promote effective and engaging language teaching practices. Ultimately, this study seeks to advance understanding and promote the adoption of innovative instructional approaches that support the development of early literacy skills among Chinese EFL learners.

B. Methods

1. Study Design

This study uses a case-study method, which involves an intensive investigation of a specific instance within its real-life context; this could be a program, an individual, an event, or even a situation (Yin, 2023). Unlike surveys or experiments that gather broader data, case studies delve deep into a single case's unique characteristics and complexities. This allows researchers to understand the "why" and "how" behind a particular phenomenon. The ultimate goal is to create a rich and detailed description of the case, capturing factual information and the perspectives and experiences of those involved (Merriam, 2009). Case studies are valuable research tools used in various fields to gain a nuanced understanding of complex situations.

In this research, however, the objective is to capture the broader perspectives of Chinese EFL teachers. A case study with four (4) multiple cases could also be justified for this research. This approach allows for a deep dive into each teacher's specific contexts and experiences, potentially revealing rich details and unique perspectives that a survey might miss. By carefully selecting four (4) teachers with diverse backgrounds (grade level, experience, location), the study could explore potential variations in their perspectives on using play-based phonics instruction. Additionally, case studies can provide a more interactive way to gather data, potentially leading to an understanding of the teachers' thoughts and experiences.

The findings from this study could significantly contribute to the development of teacher training programs that foster effective play-based phonics teaching practices. The study can identify key pedagogical approaches, challenges, and best practices by analyzing the experiences and strategies of teachers who successfully implement play-based methods. These insights can inform training modules that equip teachers with the skills and knowledge to integrate play-based learning in phonics instruction effectively. The study's findings could also be used to create targeted professional development programs that highlight the importance of play in early language learning, offering teachers practical tools and techniques for incorporating play into their teaching. Furthermore, the findings could help address teachers' barriers or misconceptions regarding the play-based approach, ensuring they are well-prepared to use it in diverse classroom settings. Ultimately, the research could serve as a valuable resource in shaping future teacher training curricula, encouraging a more dynamic and engaging approach to phonics instruction that aligns with best practices in early childhood education.

Sharing the findings with educational authorities and other institutions can play a crucial role in promoting effective learning practices in English as a Foreign Language. The insights gained from teachers' experiences with play-based phonics instruction can help shape educational policies, curriculum designs, and professional development programs. Educational authorities could use the findings to advocate for integrating play-based approaches in EFL classrooms, ensuring that phonics instruction becomes more engaging and effective. Moreover, sharing the findings with other institutions, such as teacher training colleges or professional development organizations, can help foster a broader understanding of the benefits of play-based learning.

2. Locale of the Study

Li Hu Primary School, located in Shenzhen, China, serves as the focal point for this study. The school embodies the rich cultural and educational landscape of contemporary China. Its surroundings likely blend traditional architecture and modern cityscape, reflecting China's rapid development and cultural heritage.

The school, built in 2002, is a hub of activity. Classrooms are equipped with modern educational tools, fostering an environment conducive to academic achievement and personal development. The curriculum emphasizes core subjects such as Chinese language, mathematics, EFL, and science, supplemented by cultural studies and extracurricular activities. Outside the classroom, the school grounds offer recreational spaces where students can play and socialize, promoting a balanced approach to education. Li Hu Primary School plays a crucial role in the local community, serving as an educational institution and a center for community events and gatherings.

Li Hu Primary School in Shenzhen, China, has a student population of 2,079, and its total teaching force of 70 represents a microcosm of the country's educational system, blending tradition with modernity and providing a nurturing environment for the next generation of Chinese citizens. There are four (4) teachers teaching phonics, and the subject is taught in Grades one to three levels, with contact or class hours of one (1) to two (2) per week. Pan Li is from Grade 1, Cheng Xiaomei is from Grade 2, and Zhou Qiqian and Ma Bing are from Grade 3. They answered the interview questions carefully and shared their teaching experience selflessly, which provided precious results for this study.

3. Research Instruments

Interviews

The core instrument for this case study would be in-depth interviews. A semi-structured interview guide will be developed, focusing on open-ended questions that explore the teachers' experiences with play-based learning phonics instruction and how they perceive integrating these approaches in their EFL classrooms. The interviews will focus on the following:

- Introduction: Brief introduction, the research project, and the purpose of the interview.
- Underlying beliefs and attitudes of Chinese EFL teachers towards integrating play-based approaches in phonics instruction.
- The contextual factors influencing Chinese EFL teachers' decisions to use play-based methods for teaching phonics.
- The strategies and techniques Chinese EFL teachers employ when incorporating play-based activities into phonics lessons.
- The potential challenges and opportunities associated with using play-based approaches in phonics instruction for Chinese EFL teachers.

Observations

Classroom observations will provide valuable context to complement the interviews. Researchers can gain a deeper understanding of teachers' practices by observing how they integrate or do not integrate play and phonics activities. This combination of in-depth interviews and classroom observations will allow a rich and multifaceted case study of each teacher's perspective on using a play-based approach in teaching phonics.

Document Analysis

Document analysis will serve as a crucial instrument in this study by thoroughly examining existing materials such as lesson plans, curriculum, etc., related to implementing play-based approaches in phonics instruction within Chinese EFL contexts. The study will uncover how play-based methods are incorporated into phonics instruction by analyzing curriculum guides and lesson plans, revealing the specific activities employed and their alignment with educational objectives. Additionally, reviewing teacher training materials and professional development resources will offer insights into how educators are equipped to implement these methods effectively. This analysis will also examine any official guidelines or policy documents related to phonics instruction, which can highlight the broader educational framework and expectations for integrating play-based learning. Through this comprehensive document analysis, the study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the practical application and documentation of play-based phonics instruction, identifying its strengths and improvement areas.

Focus Group Discussion

Focus group discussions will be used to gain in-depth qualitative insights into the experiences and perceptions of Chinese EFL teachers regarding the use of play-based approaches in phonics instruction. These discussions will involve small groups of teachers, selected to represent a range of teaching contexts and experience levels, to provide diverse perspectives on the effectiveness and challenges of play-based methods. During the focus groups, participants will be encouraged to share their experiences integrating play-based strategies into their phonics lessons, discuss the impact on student engagement and learning outcomes, and identify any difficulties encountered during implementation. This interactive format will facilitate rich, detailed conversations, allowing teachers to explore and articulate their views on how play-based learning influences teaching practices and student development. The focus group discussions will also help uncover common themes and divergent opinions, offering valuable qualitative data

that will complement the findings from other research instruments. By capturing the nuances of teachers' experiences and opinions, the focus groups will provide a comprehensive understanding of the practical application of play-based phonics instruction and its implications for educational practice.

4. Validation Process

The validation of the interview guide begins with selecting experts who possess extensive knowledge in EFL education, phonics instruction, and play-based learning. These experts may include educational researchers, seasoned EFL teachers, and specialists in play-based pedagogy. Once the instruments are prepared, they are submitted to these experts, along with a brief overview of the study's objectives and the guide's purpose. Experts are then asked to provide detailed feedback on the questions' content, clarity, and relevance, ensuring they align with the research objectives and effectively address key aspects of the study. Their feedback helps identify any ambiguities or gaps in the questions. Revisions will be made based on expert input, question wording will be refined, necessary queries will be added, or irrelevant ones will be removed. After incorporating these changes, the experts review the revised guide to confirm that the modifications align with the study's goals. This expert review process ensures that the interview guide is robust, precise, and capable of eliciting valuable and relevant data for the research.

5. Study Participants

The participants are English teachers from Li Hu Primary School. This research employs a case study approach, delving deep into four (4) Chinese EFL teachers' specific contexts and experiences. While a larger sample size would benefit broader generalizability, a case study with four (4) strategically chosen teachers allows for a rich and nuanced understanding of how they perceive and implement a play-based approach in teaching phonics. By carefully selecting teachers with diverse backgrounds, this study can explore potential variations in their perspectives that might not be captured in a survey. The focus here is on the in-depth exploration of individual cases, and the insights gained from these four teachers will provide valuable data for understanding this approach within the EFL context.

According to Stake (1995), case studies are designed to explore complex phenomena in depth within their real-life contexts, prioritizing contextual understanding over generalization. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2018) highlight that qualitative research often employs small, purposeful samples to gain detailed insights into participants' experiences. Yin (2018) further asserts that case studies enable researchers to delve into the complexities of specific cases, providing a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon under investigation. By selecting teachers with diverse backgrounds, this study captures variations in their perspectives and teaching practices, which might be overlooked in larger-scale surveys. This purposeful sampling and case study approach ensures a detailed exploration of individual contexts, offering valuable insights into implementing play-based phonics instruction within the EFL setting.

The alignment between the sample size and the objective of achieving depth in this study is deliberate and strategically justified. This research aims to explore, in detail, the specific contexts and experiences of four English teachers from Li Hu Primary School as they implement a play-based approach to teaching phonics. The decision to focus on four cases reflects a purposeful sampling strategy to capture diverse teaching experiences and perspectives within a manageable framework. This enables the study to explore potential variations in how these teachers perceive and implement the play-based approach. By concentrating on a smaller, more focused sample, the study ensures the level of depth necessary to uncover the complexities of their practices and

contexts, providing meaningful insights into this educational strategy within the EFL environment.

The decision to include only four participants in this case study is deliberate and grounded in the methodological framework of qualitative research, specifically within the case study approach. The participants are English teachers from Li Hu Primary School, and their inclusion is based on a strategic selection to provide a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the topic.

Case studies are inherently designed to focus on depth rather than breadth, aiming to capture the complexities and subtleties of specific contexts and experiences. As Creswell (2013) argues, qualitative case studies typically involve a small number of participants to allow for a detailed examination of each participant's perspectives and practices within their unique educational environment. Focusing on four Chinese EFL teachers, this study aims to delve deep into their specific contexts. It offers a rich, nuanced understanding of how they perceive and implement play-based approaches in phonics instruction. Moreover, Stake (1995) suggests that "the more cases included in a study, the less the attention paid to the nuances of each case." A smaller, purposively selected sample allows the researcher to engage more closely with the data, providing a detailed account of each teacher's experiences and methods, which would not be possible with a larger sample size. This approach aligns with the objectives of this research, which are to explore in detail the teachers' perceptions, methods of integration, and the challenges and opportunities encountered.

6. Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for participants in this study are as follows: first, they must be primary school teachers of grades 1-3 at Li Hu Primary School; second, they must utilize play-based methods in their phonics classes; third, they should be of Chinese nationality and graduates in English; fourth, they should employ various instructional methods, including but not limited to play-based approaches, explicit instruction, technology-integrated methods, or project-based techniques; and lastly, they should actively use English during their classes.

The exclusion criteria include teachers who lack experience with phonics instruction, those involved in other teaching approaches, part-time or non-regular teachers, and individuals unfamiliar with the study's context. Excluding part-time or non-regular teachers is a deliberate decision to ensure consistency and depth in the findings. These teachers often have differing levels of involvement, responsibilities, and engagement with students compared to full-time teachers, which may result in variations in teaching practices and pedagogical perspectives. Due to their limited classroom time, part-time and non-regular teachers may not implement play-based methods with the same frequency or consistency as full-time teachers, and their experiences may not fully capture the approaches and challenges faced by those more regularly involved in the curriculum.

7. Procedures

This section outlines the process of showcasing interviews and observations for the case study, which employs a multifaceted approach to data collection. The study focuses on in-depth interviews and classroom observations to explore the perspectives of four Chinese EFL teachers on using a play-based approach in teaching phonics. A well-structured interview schedule will be created, featuring open-ended questions to better understand the teachers' experiences with play-based learning, phonics instruction, and their views on integrating these methods.

Classroom observations will also play a crucial role in this case study. With informed consent from both the teachers and school administration, observations will be conducted using a structured observation protocol to document the classroom environment, activity flow, student engagement, and teacher-student interactions related to play and phonics. All recordings and

observation notes will be carefully documented and anonymized to ensure confidentiality. The data will then be organized and coded for thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns in the teachers' perspectives.

The study will examine the teachers' perceptions through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviews will explore their understanding, beliefs, and experiences with the play-based approach to phonics instruction. A structured interview schedule with open-ended questions will probe the effectiveness, benefits, and challenges of using play-based methods in EFL phonics teaching. Classroom observations will be conducted alongside the interviews to identify the specific methods teachers use to integrate play-based learning into their lessons. The interviews and observational data will be synthesized to analyze the dynamics of implementing play-based methods, including any challenges and opportunities encountered during the process.

8. Data collection

This case study will employ a multifaceted data collection approach to explore the perspectives of four Chinese EFL teachers on using a play-based approach in teaching phonics. The core instrument will be in-depth interviews, guided by a well-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions. These interviews will focus on the teachers' experiences with play-based learning, phonics instruction, and their perceptions of integrating these approaches in their classrooms. Careful consideration will be given when selecting teachers to ensure diverse backgrounds in grade level and teaching experience, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of potential variations in perspectives.

In addition to the interviews, classroom observations will be conducted with informed consent to observe how the play-based approach is implemented in practice. The observations will focus on aspects such as the classroom environment, activity flow, student engagement, and teacher-student interactions related to play and phonics. All data collected will be carefully documented, anonymized, and securely stored to ensure confidentiality. The data will be managed in a password-protected digital repository, accessible only to authorized research team members, with physical notes or recordings stored in a locked filing cabinet. Regular backups will be made to prevent data loss.

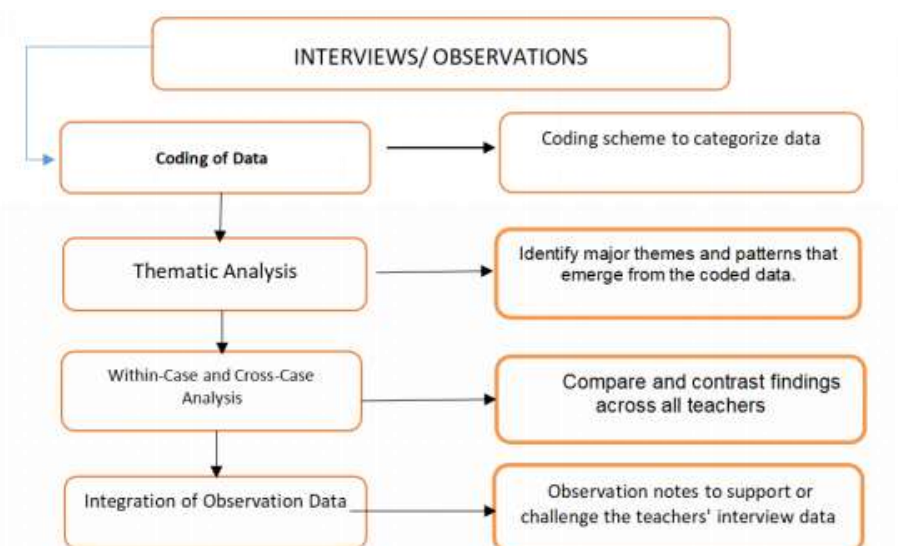
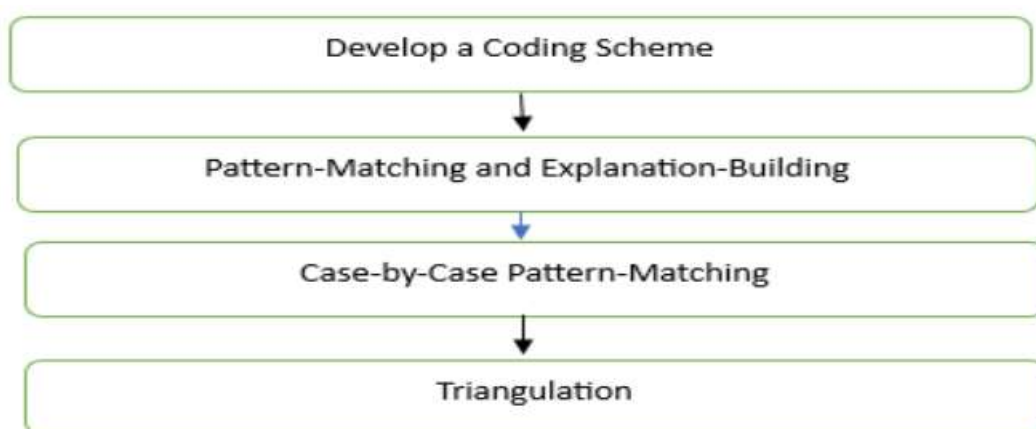


Figure 1.Conceptual Framework.



Graph 1. *Framework for Data Analysis*

C. Results and Discussion

The results and discussion section presents the findings of this study, which explores Chinese EFL teachers' perspectives on the use of a play-based approach to teaching phonics. It provides an in-depth analysis of teachers' perceptions, the methods they employ, and the dynamics of implementing this approach in their classrooms.

The discussion highlights the interplay between the pedagogical potential of play-based methods and the practical challenges encountered, offering insights into opportunities for enhancing phonics instruction in Chinese EFL settings. The findings are interpreted in light of the study's objectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and feasibility of play-based phonics instruction. This section also includes a Focus Group Discussion (FGD), where teachers reflect on their experiences and share their views on the integration of play-based strategies. The FGD offers valuable qualitative data on how teachers balance play with academic rigor and addresses the challenges they face in aligning play-based activities with traditional teaching goals.

1. Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions of the play-based approach in phonics instruction.

Theme 1 - General Attitudes Toward Play-Based Approaches

This theme explores the perceptions and attitudes of the four teacher participants regarding the use of play-based approaches in phonics instruction. Their responses reflect a mix of enthusiasm, cautious optimism, and considerations about practical challenges.

Teacher A expressed significant enthusiasm for the play-based approach, emphasizing its potential to transform phonics learning into an enjoyable experience. They shared, "I believe that play-based approaches bring a sense of fun to learning phonics, which keeps students motivated and interested. It turns what could be a tedious process into an enjoyable activity." This statement highlights the role of engagement as a critical factor in learning. Teacher A believes that when students are actively engaged and find joy in their learning activities, they are more likely to stay motivated and absorb the material. This perspective aligns with theories in educational psychology that suggest active participation and positive emotions enhance cognitive processing and retention.

On the other hand, Teacher B highlighted a potential drawback to adopting play-based approaches. They noted, "While I appreciate the idea of play-based learning, I find it challenging to balance play with achieving measurable learning outcomes. Parents also sometimes question

its seriousness.” This statement underscores the challenges faced by educators when implementing innovative methods in environments where results and accountability are often paramount. Teacher B’s concern about parental expectations indicates the external pressures teachers encounter, particularly in educational systems where traditional teaching methods and quantifiable outcomes are deeply valued. This highlights a broader tension between fostering creativity and meeting societal and institutional demands.

Teacher C added a layer of thoughtfulness to the discussion, suggesting that play-based learning must be carefully structured to maximize its potential benefits. They stated, “Play-based methods are valuable, but they need to be carefully planned to ensure students actually learn the phonics skills we aim to teach. It’s not just about playing; it’s about purposeful play.” Teacher C’s emphasis on purposeful play reflects an understanding that, while engaging, play-based methods need to be intentionally designed to align with learning objectives. This perspective reinforces the idea that educational play is most effective when grounded in clear pedagogical goals and outcomes.

Finally, Teacher D offered a more neutral stance, reflecting on the situational appropriateness of play-based methods. They remarked, “I think play-based learning has its place, but it depends on the class and the students. Some respond well, while others need more structured teaching.” This suggests a belief in adaptability as a key component of effective teaching. Teacher D’s comment acknowledges the diversity of student needs and learning styles, emphasizing the importance of customizing teaching strategies to fit the unique dynamics of each classroom.

Theme 2 - Beliefs About Effectiveness and Comparative Perspectives

This theme delves deeper into the participants’ beliefs about the effectiveness of play-based approaches for phonics instruction and their comparisons to traditional teaching methods. The participants shared nuanced insights, drawing from their professional experiences and observations.

Teacher A was a strong advocate for the effectiveness of play-based methods, particularly for younger learners. They shared, “I’ve seen how games like word matching or letter hunts make abstract phonics concepts more concrete and relatable for children. It’s easier for them to remember what they learn when they’re enjoying the process.” This observation underscores the idea that play-based approaches can bridge the gap between abstract concepts and practical understanding. Teacher A believes that the immersive nature of play allows children to engage with phonics in a way that feels natural and intuitive. This aligns with constructive theories, which emphasize learning as an active, meaningful process grounded in real-world contexts.

Teacher B, however, highlighted potential limitations, focusing on the challenges of using play-based methods for students who require more direct instruction. They explained, “In my experience, traditional drills and repetition are still essential, especially for students struggling with the basics. Play-based learning may not always provide the depth of practice needed for mastery.” This perspective suggests that play-based approaches, while effective for engagement and initial understanding, may not be sufficient for all learners, particularly those who need more focused and repetitive practice to grasp foundational skills. Teacher B’s statement reflects a pragmatic approach, acknowledging that diverse methods may be required to meet the varied needs of students. Teacher C advocated for a balanced or blended approach, combining the strengths of both play-based and traditional methods. They stated, “I don’t think it’s about choosing one over the other. Play-based learning is excellent for introducing concepts and making lessons engaging, but traditional methods are invaluable for reinforcing and assessing those concepts.” This insight highlights the complementary nature of these approaches. Teacher

C recognizes that while play-based methods excel at fostering engagement and initial comprehension, traditional methods provide the rigor and structure needed for skill reinforcement and assessment. This blended perspective aligns with research suggesting that integrating multiple pedagogical approaches can yield better learning outcomes than relying on a single method.

Teacher D reflected on the long-term impact of play-based learning, drawing from their own classroom experiences. They observed, “I’ve noticed that students remember concepts better when they’ve learned them through play. It sticks with them, but I still think traditional methods are quicker for immediate results.” This statement highlights the lasting impression that play-based learning can leave on students, suggesting that it supports deeper and more enduring understanding. However, Teacher D also pointed out that traditional methods may be more efficient for achieving short-term goals, such as preparing for exams or completing specific lessons. This theme reveals a consensus among the teachers that while play-based approaches are highly effective for engaging students and fostering long-term retention, traditional methods play an essential role in providing structure, depth, and measurable outcomes. This understanding underscores the importance of flexibility and adaptability in instructional practices.

Theme 3 - Institutional and Environmental Support

The level of institutional and environmental support plays a critical role in influencing Chinese EFL teachers' decisions to adopt play-based approaches in phonics instruction. Teachers reported varying degrees of support from their school administrations, which directly impacted their ability to experiment with innovative methods. Teacher A (P1) observed that while their school encourages innovative teaching strategies, including play-based learning, the absence of formal guidelines leaves its implementation largely to individual discretion. This flexibility allows for creativity but often results in inconsistent practices. In contrast, Teacher B (P2) described a more restrictive environment, explaining that their administration places greater emphasis on traditional teaching methods, viewing play-based approaches as less rigorous and therefore less valuable. This lack of encouragement from leadership limits opportunities to explore alternative methods. Teacher C (P3) highlighted the influence of school culture, explaining that peer collaboration during team meetings fosters a supportive environment where teachers can exchange ideas and strategies for integrating play-based methods. Such interactions inspire some educators to innovate despite limited formal backing. These accounts underscore the significant impact of school policies, administrative attitudes, and collaborative culture in shaping teachers' decisions about instructional methods.

Theme 4 - Socio-Cultural and Parental Influences

Societal expectations and cultural attitudes towards education and play significantly influence teachers' willingness to adopt play-based approaches in their classrooms. In China, where education is often perceived as a serious and outcome-driven endeavor, some teachers feel constrained by cultural norms that prioritize academic achievement over playful learning. Teacher D (P4) explained, “In our culture, education is highly structured, and many parents equate learning with discipline and hard work. This makes it challenging to justify using playful activities in class.” This sentiment reflects a broader societal skepticism towards methods perceived as overly lenient or unstructured.

Parental involvement further shapes teachers' decisions, as feedback from families can reinforce or deter the use of play-based strategies. Teacher A (P1) shared, “Some parents appreciate the creativity and engagement that play-based learning brings, but others worry it’s not rigorous enough for foundational skills like phonics.” Teacher B (P2) echoed this concern,

noting that frequent questions from parents about the seriousness of play-based methods often lead them to revert to traditional techniques to avoid misunderstandings. On the other hand, Teacher C (P3) mentioned that parents who have seen the benefits of these methods in practice tend to be more supportive, creating a positive feedback loop that encourages continued use. These insights reveal how deeply embedded cultural values and parental attitudes shape the educational strategies teachers feel comfortable employing, often requiring them to navigate between innovation and societal expectations.

2. Methods employed by Chinese EFL teachers when integrating the play-based approach into their phonics lessons

The methods employed by Chinese EFL teachers when integrating the play-based approach into their phonics lessons pertain to the strategies and techniques they utilize to make phonics instruction engaging and effective. These strategies were identified through the instruments used in the study, such as interviews or surveys, and were further revealed in the responses provided by the participants. The answers highlighted specific approaches, including interactive and hands-on activities, such as word matching games and songs with accompanying movements, which serve to actively engage students and connect phonetic sounds with physical actions. Teachers also use storytelling and role-playing to create a contextualized and immersive learning environment.

Theme 5 - Interactive and Hands-On Activities

One of the primary methods employed by Chinese EFL teachers when integrating the play-based approach into their phonics lessons is the use of interactive and hands-on activities. These methods are designed to engage students actively, encouraging them to participate in learning through movement, games, and tactile experiences. Teacher A (P1) explained, “I use activities like word matching games, where students have to match pictures with the corresponding phonetic symbols. It keeps them physically engaged and allows them to connect sounds with visual representations in a fun way.” This highlights a common approach in which phonics instruction is integrated into games that not only make learning enjoyable but also facilitate deeper cognitive connections between phonetic sounds and images. Teacher B (P2) added:

“I incorporate singing and movement into my lessons. For example, I have a song where students repeat the sounds and then perform corresponding actions like jumping or clapping when they hear certain sounds. This physical interaction helps them remember the sounds better.”

This use of songs and physical actions bridges the gap between abstract phonics concepts and practical application, further reinforcing phonics through kinetic learning.

These interactive methods are designed not just to keep students entertained but to ensure that they internalize phonetic sounds through active participation. The emphasis on movement and hands-on activities shows how play-based methods can make phonics instruction more dynamic, ensuring that students learn through both physical activity and cognitive engagement. This approach also supports differentiated learning, allowing students to interact with content in various ways, accommodating different learning styles.

Theme 6 - Storytelling and Role-Playing

Another significant method used by teachers is storytelling and role-playing, which adds a narrative element to phonics instruction. This method taps into students’ imaginations and allows them to learn phonics in a context that is both meaningful and memorable. Teacher C (P3) shared:

"I create stories that incorporate the phonics sounds we are learning. For example, if we are learning the 'sh' sound, I might tell a story about a ship sailing through a sea of sharks. The story helps students contextualize the sound and relate it to real-world situations."

This approach not only integrates phonics instruction into a rich, contextual narrative but also makes it more relatable for young learners, enhancing both comprehension and retention. Teacher D (P4) elaborated:

"I sometimes have the students act out parts of the story we are learning. By assigning them roles based on phonetic sounds, they get to play and learn the sounds in a social, interactive setting. It encourages collaboration and makes the lesson feel less like a traditional lecture."

In this way, role-playing and storytelling help create a dynamic classroom atmosphere where learning is both social and immersive.

These methods are particularly effective in making phonics instruction more engaging by blending language learning with creativity and social interaction. Teachers use these strategies to draw students into the learning process, encouraging them to express themselves while reinforcing the phonics concepts in a fun, memorable manner. Storytelling, especially when combined with role-playing, offers students a way to practice phonics in a contextualized and emotionally resonant way, which can significantly improve both their phonological awareness and overall language skills. Through these creative activities, students not only learn phonics but also develop a love for language and storytelling, which can have long-term benefits for their literacy development.

3. Challenges and Opportunities encountered by Chinese EFL teachers in using play-based methods for phonics instruction

One of the most significant challenges that Chinese EFL teachers encounter when implementing play-based methods in phonics instruction is the lack of institutional support and the pressure to adhere to traditional educational standards. Teacher A (P1) explained, "The biggest challenge is that while we might want to use play-based activities, the school system is still very focused on traditional methods. There is constant pressure to prepare students for exams, which often leaves little room for activities that are seen as less formal, like play-based learning." This reveals a common struggle in Chinese education, where the emphasis on standardized testing and academic rigor often limits the opportunity for more flexible, creative teaching methods such as play-based learning. Teacher B (P2) echoed similar sentiments, stating, "In many ways, using play-based methods feels like a risk. Parents expect measurable results, and it's hard to convince them that play-based learning can be effective in phonics instruction." This highlights the tension between innovative, child-centered approaches and the expectations of parents and the broader educational system. Additionally, Teacher C (P3) pointed out, "There is also the issue of time. With the heavy workload and tight curriculum schedules, it's challenging to find enough time for play-based activities, which often require more preparation and spontaneity." This statement emphasizes that time constraints are a significant barrier in the effective integration of play-based methods, as they require more flexibility and planning compared to traditional methods.

Despite these challenges, some teachers are able to find opportunities within their classrooms to introduce play-based elements, though the tension with traditional expectations remains a central obstacle. The lack of clear guidelines from the administration regarding play-based methods further complicates the situation, as teachers feel uncertain about how to balance creativity with the need to conform to institutional norms.

Theme 8 - Opportunities for Play-Based Phonics Instruction

Despite the challenges, Chinese EFL teachers also see significant opportunities in using play-based methods for phonics instruction, especially when it comes to fostering student engagement and enhancing learning outcomes. Teacher D (P4) stated, “The students love play-based activities. It makes learning much more fun and engaging. I’ve noticed they are more enthusiastic to learn and participate in lessons where play is involved.” This positive response from students is a key opportunity identified by teachers, as it suggests that play-based methods can increase motivation and create a more positive classroom atmosphere. Teacher A (P1) added, “When students are engaged in games or role-playing activities, they tend to remember the phonetic sounds better because they’re associating the learning with an enjoyable experience. It becomes a memorable part of their day.” This statement reflects how play-based learning not only engages students but also facilitates long-term retention of phonics knowledge by connecting learning with enjoyable experiences.

Furthermore, Teacher B (P2) highlighted the opportunity for building a more inclusive learning environment through play-based activities, stating, “Play-based methods allow me to differentiate instruction more effectively. I can adjust the games or activities to cater to students with different levels of understanding, ensuring that everyone can participate and benefit.” This indicates that play-based methods can offer a more personalized approach to learning, catering to diverse student needs and promoting inclusivity. Additionally, Teacher C (P3) observed, “Play-based learning gives me the freedom to be creative and responsive in my teaching. It allows me to incorporate a variety of materials and activities that keep the lessons fresh and interesting for the students.” The flexibility and creativity that play-based methods provide are valuable opportunities for teachers to innovate and adapt their lessons to maintain student interest and meet individual learning needs. While teachers face challenges in implementing play-based phonics instruction due to institutional and cultural constraints, they also recognize its potential for enhancing student engagement, facilitating better retention, and providing a more inclusive learning environment. These opportunities make the play-based approach a promising strategy, despite the barriers it encounters.

D. Conclusion

The findings reveal that teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward play-based phonics instruction, recognizing its potential to enhance student engagement and learning. However, a tension persists between enthusiasm for play and the challenge of aligning it with traditional academic goals, highlighting the need for professional development and strategies to balance innovative methods with measurable outcomes. Institutional and environmental factors, such as resource availability, classroom design, administrative support, and parental attitudes, significantly influence the adoption of play-based phonics instruction. While progress has been made in fostering supportive environments, challenges like resource limitations and conflicting priorities underscore the need for clear guidelines, collaborative teacher practices, and greater parental engagement to enhance implementation.

Interactive and play-based approaches effectively enhance phonics instruction by engaging learners through multisensory activities, storytelling, and movement, fostering cognitive and linguistic development. Grounded in established educational theories, these methods cater to diverse learning styles and create meaningful learning experiences, underscoring their value in early childhood education. Integrating play-based learning with phonics instruction in EFL classrooms provides a compelling pathway for enhancing student engagement, phonics acquisition, and retention. However, significant challenges emerge due to cultural norms,

institutional expectations, and resource constraints. Teachers must carefully balance traditional, exam-oriented practices with the flexibility required for playful, student-centered methodologies.

Acknowledgment

Sincere thanks to my adviser Princess Policarpio, to all Proposal defense committee members, to the Graduate School of AUF, to my classmates, and to others who have provided help! Your support has allowed me to move forward.

References

- Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. MIT Press.
- Adams, M. J. (1994). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. MIT Press.
- Armbruster, B. B., Lehr, F., & Osborn, J. (2001). *Put reading first: The research building blocks for teaching children to read* (2nd ed.). National Institute for Literacy.
- Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. J. (2003). The importance of play: Why children need to play. *Early Childhood Today*, 18(2), 6–7.
- Brown, P. (2009). *Active learning and student engagement: Strategies for the modern classroom*. Routledge.
- Bruner, J. S. (1966). *Toward a theory of instruction*. Harvard University Press.
- Cheep-Aranai, R., Reinders, H., & Wasanasomsithi, P. (2015). Implementing play-based language learning with children: From potential to practice. In H. Reinders & P. Wasanasomsithi (Eds.), *Innovation in language learning and teaching* (pp. 141–159).
- Chen, L. (2018). Challenges in adopting play-based methods for EFL phonics. In X. Li & Y. Wang (Eds.), *Innovations in English language teaching in China* (pp. 123–145).
- Chen, X. (2021). *Phonics instruction in EFL contexts: Challenges and strategies for Chinese learners*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Clay, M. M. (1993). *An observation survey of early literacy achievement*. Heinemann.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Dau, E., & Jones, E. (1999). Child's play: Revisiting play in early childhood settings. *Child's Play: Revisiting Play in Early Childhood Settings*.
- Ehri, L. C., Nunes, S. R., Stahl, S. A., & Willows, D. M. (2001). Systematic phonics instruction helps students learn to read: Evidence from the National Reading Panel's meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 71(3), 393–447. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543071003393>
- Foorman, B. R., Beyler, N., Borradaile, K., Coyne, M., Denton, C. A., Dimino, J., ... & Wissel, S. (2016). *Foundational skills to support reading for understanding in kindergarten through 3rd grade* (NCEE 2016-4008). National Center for Education Evaluation. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_040717.pdf
- Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change*. Teachers College Press.

- Hesterman, S., & Targowska, A. (2020). The why and how of play-based learning in the early years: A critical review. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 45(3), 216–229.
- Jin, L., & Cortazzi, M. (2006). Changing practices in Chinese cultures of learning. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 19(1), 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908310608668751>
- Khalil, N., Aljanazrah, A., Hamed, G., & Murtagh, E. (2022). Exploring teacher educators' perspectives of play-based learning: A mixed method approach. *Education Sciences*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12020095>
- Li, Y., & Wang, H. (2022). Bridging the gap: Aligning phonics instruction with reading practices in Chinese primary schools. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 15(3), 45–60.
- Liu, R. (2020). Digital visualization tools for phonics instruction in Chinese EFL classrooms. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 33(5–6), 678–695.
- Liu, R. (2020). Multimodal phonics instruction for Chinese EFL learners: Integrating visual and digital tools. *TESOL Quarterly*, 54(2), 456–481. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.567>
- Liu, Y., & Chen, J. (2017). Phonics instruction in Chinese EFL contexts: A meta-analysis of reading proficiency outcomes. *Language Teaching Research*, 21(4), 456–475.
- Liu, Y., & Chen, J. (2017). The effectiveness of phonics instruction on reading proficiency in Chinese EFL learners. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 8(3), 512–520. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0803.14>
- Melmed, M. (2006). Sing, spell, read & write. International Learning Systems.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Moats, L. C. (2009). Knowledge foundations for teaching reading and spelling. *Reading and Writing*, 22(4), 379–399. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-009-9162-1>
- Moeller, B. (2009). Phonics games kids can't resist!: 25 lively learning games that make teaching phonics easy and fun. Scholastic Teaching Resources.
- National Reading Panel. (2000). Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading instruction. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137449757_10
- Parker, R., & Thomsen, B. S. (2019). Learning through play at school: A study of playful integrated pedagogies that foster children's holistic skills development in the primary school classroom. *Frontiers in Education*, 4, Article 173.
- Patton, B. (n.d.). Implementing play-based learning. Retrieved from https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education_masters
- Piaget, J. (1950). *The psychology of intelligence* (D. E. Berlyne & M. Piercy, Trans.; 1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203164730>
- Pyle, A., & Danniels, E. (2017). A continuum of play-based learning: The role of the teacher in play-based pedagogy and the fear of hijacking play. *Early Education and Development*, 28(3), 274–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1220771>
- Rogers, S. (2011). Play and pedagogy: A conflict of values? In S. Rogers (Ed.), *Rethinking play and pedagogy in early childhood education* (pp. 5–18). Routledge.
- Rogers, S. (2011). *Rethinking play and pedagogy in early childhood education: Concepts, contexts and cultures*. Routledge.

- Rosenshine, B. (2010). Principles of instruction: Research-based strategies that all teachers should know. *American Educator*, 36(1), 12–19, 39. <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Rosenshine.pdf>
- Routman, R. (2018). *Literacy essentials: Engagement, excellence, and equity for all learners*. Stenhouse Publishers.
- Scholarworks, S., & Acevedo, E. (n.d.). Teacher's implementation of play-based learning practices and barriers encountered in kindergarten classrooms. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations>
- Shaywitz, S. E. (2004). *Overcoming dyslexia: A new and complete science-based program for reading problems at any level*. Vintage.
- Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(1), 1–22.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage Publications.
- Su, Y., Zhang, L., & Li, H. (2022). Play-based learning in EFL classrooms: Enhancing children's English acquisition. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 50(4), 621–635.
- Suwastini, N. K. A., Puspawati, N. W. N., Nitiasih, P. K., Adnyani, N. L. P. S., & Rusnalasari, Z. D. (2022). Play-based learning for creating fun language classroom. *Lentera Pendidikan: Jurnal Ilmu Tarbiyah Dan Keguruan*, 25(2), 250–270. <https://doi.org/10.24252/lp.2022v25n2i6>
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms* (2nd ed.). ASCD.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1967). Play and its role in the mental development of the child. *Soviet Psychology*, 5(3), 6–18.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Walther, L. (n.d.). The impact of play-based learning. Retrieved from https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education_masters
- Wood, E. (2014). *Play, learning and the early childhood curriculum* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Xu, J., & Huang, Y. (2023). Digital phonics: Technology-enhanced reading instruction in Chinese primary schools. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 26(1), 112–125. [https://doi.org/10.30191/ETS.202301_26\(1\).0009](https://doi.org/10.30191/ETS.202301_26(1).0009)
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.
- Yin, R. K. (2023). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (7th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Zhang, L., & Liu, X. (2019). The impact of explicit phonics instruction on reading accuracy and fluency in Chinese EFL classrooms. *English Language Teaching*, 12(5), 78–92.
- Zhang, W., & Liu, M. (2019). The impact of systematic phonics instruction on Chinese EFL learners' reading development. *System*, 82, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2019.02.003>