

PLAY AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN LANGUAGE TEACHING



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Abstract: *Observing children engaged in play, we immediately realize how play is one of the most authentic expressions of childhood, and how deeply rooted it is in children's nature, involving spontaneity, concentration, imagination, and joy. Through play, children explore the world, roles, relationships, and rules, learn naturally, have meaningful experiences, and develop skills essential to their cognitive, emotional, and social growth. Play, contrary to popular belief, is not just a way for children to pass the time; it is a way of being, of communicating, and, above all, a way of learning. Moreover, play is a fundamental human experience, independent of age and from this perspective, it is crucial to integrate play into schools with traditional learning methods. This paper will analyze the characteristics of play and its implications from a psycho-pedagogical perspective, connecting it to the educational context, and seeking to enhance its value as an effective educational and learning tool for all ages.*

Keywords: play, learning languages, informal learning, young learners.

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1. Learning languages and the role of intrinsic motivation

Institutionalized formal learning is still the preferred method of foreign language teaching in many schools: lectures, summative assessments, memorization of grammatical rules, limited oral conversation, etc., often accompanied by a lack of student interest, despite the importance of the subject. This approach partially ensures the transmission of linguistic knowledge, but it presents a series of limitations that reduce its effectiveness and risk creating learning confined to the school context, neglecting the students' broader experience.

One of the main limitations is that motivation for formal learning tends to be linked to the pursuit of external rewards (e.g., grades) more than for other, less formal, types of learning. (Johnson, Majewska, 2022). This kind of stimuli orient

assessment towards extrinsic objectives, distancing it from intrinsic motivation, which instead coincides with completing an interesting task while demonstrating competence and autonomy.

Unfortunately, this model prevails in formal teaching, as students study English to avoid failing or to obtain a high grade. When formal motivation is based almost exclusively on these aspects, engagement declines, and students speak English not to communicate but only for the grade they will get. Growth in skills and knowledge depends solely on incentives that, once completed (for example, after compulsory education), cause such growth to collapse. It would be more effective, however, to stimulate students by fostering intrinsic motivation to learn English, as this motivation stems from the pleasure of performing an action, without any specific reward. Specifically, intrinsic motivation is that which comes from within the individual and allows a person to be motivated by the pleasure of the learning process itself or by the desire to feel better. It is understood that, by favoring the intrinsic instead of the extrinsic one, the learning process would be more profitable as well as engaging, and therefore it is believed that intrinsic motivation leads to better learning results than extrinsic motivation.

- **Play as a remedy for *foreign language anxiety***

While extrinsic motivation through grades can be effective as an initial incentive, it loses its effectiveness over time, sometimes even producing counterproductive effects, so it should be limited to a short duration. Combined with this is the phenomenon of *foreign language anxiety*, the anxiety that occurs when a foreign language is learned in formal situations, particularly when the learner has little or no ability to communicate in that language. This anxiety is an affective variable often linked to foreign language learning, and it causes fear of communication, fear of judgment, and reduces spontaneous participation (also because the language is practiced only in abstract school activities and inauthentic contexts). Furthermore, the formal setting favors students who adapt to standard teaching methods, but penalizes those with different timeframes, rhythms, needs, and backgrounds, who are more likely to develop resistance to the language.

It is essential to promote strategies geared towards intrinsic motivation, which enhance a sense of autonomy and competence, reduce dependence on external rewards, and contain anxiety. This would transform academic motivation into an authentic and engaging drive for learning English, as well as being the perfect basis for enhancing play as a support for the language journey, in conjunction with informal learning.

Informal learning is therefore the perspective we should strive for. It represents

[...] the ongoing process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment ... Generally [it] is unorganized and often unsystematic; yet it accounts for the great bulk of any person's total lifetime learning, including that of even a highly 'schooled' person (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 3).

Individuals activate themselves autonomously, following concrete needs such as being able to express themselves or having to solve a problem. This outlines this type of learning as intrinsically motivating since it responds to real needs, unlike formal learning, where extrinsic objectives such as grades or passing an assessment test prevail.

This approach also fosters self-regulation and metacognition: the former is the process by which learners set goals for their own learning and then seek to monitor, regulate, and control cognitive processes, motivation, and behavior in order to achieve those goals. Metacognition coincides with the ability to monitor, evaluate, and understand what needs to be done to improve learning performance. Essentially, people learn to set goals, plan actions, monitor progress, and reflect on results: all fundamental skills for lifelong learning.

Interesting in this context could be the iceberg metaphor outlined by John Seely¹, in which the surface layer represents formal or explicit knowledge, acquired in the classroom, and the hidden layer of the iceberg represents tacit or informal knowledge, constructed outside of school. According to the American author, tacit (informal) knowledge is more extensive and long-lasting than explicit (formal) knowledge.

The difference between formal and informal learning lies in experience, as informal learning arises from everyday experiences such as problem-solving and conversation with others. It occurs through trial and error, immediate feedback, direct observation, active reflection, and modeling. In this context, mistakes become opportunities for learning rather than failure, fostering the natural and profound acquisition of skills.

However, despite its centrality, informal learning is still too invisible in the institutionalized school context, dominated by formal methods that fail to recognize its value. Informal experience must be enhanced by integrating it into the curriculum at all levels and grades, but at the same time, informal learning, without the rigor and organization of formal activity, becomes unmanageable and of little educational value. The goal is therefore to combine spontaneity and structure, and play can be the perfect solution, the "bridge" between the two perspectives.

¹ For more details see <https://www.johnseelybrown.com/CJKoh.pdf>. Last accessed 12.10.2025.

2. Play and language teaching from very young learners to adults between benefits and challenges

The need to begin learning a foreign language (in the case of Italian schools, English) at an early age has been extensively studied. However, the concept of play-based activity has rarely been discussed in relation to pre-primary language learning, but in light of what has been stated in the previous paragraphs, it seems clear that it is an extremely effective strategy for promoting language acquisition in the early years of life.

As neurosciences demonstrated, the infant brain exhibits high levels of plasticity and strong neurosensory receptivity, and this cognitive openness is combined with an emotional attitude conducive to learning, in which the desire to experiment prevails over the fear of making mistakes.

In this scenario, play emerges as the ideal educational strategy for learning a foreign language, such as English, also because play is a complex activity characterized by intrinsic motivation, spontaneity, creative freedom, and pleasure: all central elements for supporting effective language learning.

According to Garvey's definition, which describes play as an "affective behavioral system" (Garvey, 2009) capable of engaging emotions, behaviors, and relationships within a dynamic and open context, it is clear how it lends itself naturally to language learning. It creates a safe and motivating environment, in which the student can experiment, without external pressure, with a new linguistic code, discovering the pleasure of communication within their ZPD. (Vygotskij, 1987).

Language play enables an effective blend of formal and informal learning, overcoming the limitations of the traditional model based on lectures and the memorization of abstract rules. In a playful context, language is used in meaningful and concrete situations, where students perceive English as a tool for action and interaction, not as a school subject. Furthermore, through play, authentic scenarios can be created, which foster the development of communicative competence. In this way, play promotes situated learning, where language is linked to lived experience rather than decontextualized exercises.

Another benefit of using play as a teaching strategy in ELT concerns the emotional and motivational dimension: play helps reduce foreign language anxiety, which (as previously mentioned) can limit spontaneous language use in formal situations. Within play, mistakes lose their negative connotations and become an integral part of the learning process, encouraging active participation, boosting self-esteem, and strengthening children's confidence in their own communication skills.

Furthermore, play allows for the development of transversal skills beyond linguistic ones, such as cooperation, respect for rules, problem solving, and creativity. This enriches the linguistic experience and contributes to the child's overall

development, integrating cognitive, emotional, and social aspects. Play therefore represents the natural link between a child's spontaneous predisposition to language learning and the need to structure effective educational programs in preschool. Thanks to the playful experience, language acquisition becomes an authentic, motivating process that respects the developmental characteristics of preschool age.

Especially in preschool, where games are an integral part of daily life, play presents itself as a methodological choice consistent with the child's characteristics and needs, proving essential for truly effective language teaching.

A key aspect in analyzing methodologies for early English teaching concerns the specific challenges inherent in preschool, which limit their implementation. International literature agrees that starting foreign language learning early is not, in itself, a guarantee of success. Indeed, in the absence of a well-structured learning program, the benefits of early exposure are severely limited.

At this level, children's exposure to English (when taught) appears to be often formally focused and limited to teacher-led activities, such as repeating linguistic elements, singing songs, and playing games. While acknowledging the value of these activities, an approach based solely on them is ineffective and, in fact, unlikely to foster genuine communicative competence in children in the language being taught.

Added to this, there are some important curricular and professional challenges: in many contexts, the introduction of English in preschool (and even primary school) preceded the development of appropriate curricula and materials, while there are insufficient opportunities for specialized training and professional development in EFL teaching. The result is a lack of consistency between the educational objectives established at the institutional level and the actual operational resources available to schools. This imbalance negatively influences the quality of the educational offering, with direct repercussions on the linguistic experience of children, who are often taught by less experienced and less qualified teachers.

Another critical issue concerns the fragmented nature of exposure to the English language: English teaching is usually dissociated from other aspects of the school curriculum, and limited to lessons lasting approximately 30-45 minutes once or twice a week (Robinson, Murão, 2015:17). This approach reduces language learning to an isolated, poorly contextualized experience, hindering the emergence of authentic familiarity with the language. On the contrary, early learning is only effective when experiences are continuous, integrated, and meaningful. Without a constant and contextual presence of the language in daily school life, the risk is that children will be offered superficial contact, which does not translate into learning.

Alongside these organizational and methodological limitations, there is also cultural resistance among some families and teachers. Some educational staff and parents believe that introducing English at such an early age could negatively

impact the development of the native language, or interfere with other aspects of child development, such as social and emotional skills, which are considered to be more important than the acquisition of a foreign language. Although scientific research has largely refuted these fears, demonstrating that early bilingualism not only hinders but actually strengthens general linguistic skills, these beliefs persist in many educational contexts, fueling low motivation and underinvestment in the potential of language teaching.

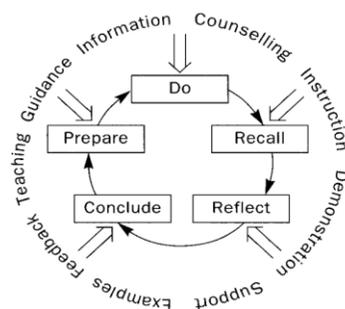
For these reasons, English teaching in Italian preschool system is still hampered by structural, methodological, and cultural factors. The lack of an integrated pedagogical vision, the weakness of specific training, and the fragmented nature of the experiences offered hinder the achievement of truly effective early learning. To overcome these limitations, a systemic approach is needed, involving initial and ongoing teacher training, as well as constructive dialogue with families. Only in this way can English become a genuine educational resource, capable of enriching the development of preschool children.

- **Play and language teaching beyond preschool**

Play is the preferred tool for learning English in preschool, but its effectiveness does not end at this age. Play could also play a central role in primary and secondary school, as well as in adult language learning contexts, adapting to the different learning needs of students.

In support of this, it is important to revisit the concept that the ability to use a language appears to be more of a skill learned through practice (similar to playing soccer or riding a bicycle) than a collection of data learned and then applied. Linguistic ability, therefore, is consolidated through the active and situated experience of the linguistic code, just as occurs with some complex motor skills such as riding a bicycle. In this sense, language is not just a set of theoretical knowledge to be memorized, but a practical skill, a communicative *savoir-faire* that is refined in real-world contexts, through interaction.

Just as we learn to ride a bicycle by falling and trying again, language learning requires a context in which students can actually experiment, make mistakes, receive feedback, and communicate with purpose.



Teaching and the experiential learning cycle

Even in the experiential learning highlighted by James Scrivener (Scrivener, 2009: 20) in the figure above, the first step in learning is doing something (Do), which coincides with concrete experience, living a situation, and actively participating, followed by various phases of reflection. The same cycle provides some important conclusions for language teaching: give students the opportunity to do things independently, allow for practical experience in doing things (for example, in using language rather than simply listening to language lessons). Making mistakes and learn from them is part of the learning process as well.

The above model perfectly fits the playful teaching of a foreign language across all age groups, as it values concrete action, fosters implicit language acquisition, and promotes active, motivating, and situated learning. Language learners seem to need a number of things beyond simply listening to explanations. Among other things, they need opportunities to play and communicate with the language itself. In this context, play proves to be an ideal tool for all ages, not only because it actively involves the student by activating the experiential learning cycle, but because it offers realistic and motivating contexts in which to use a foreign language, ensuring deep and lasting linguistic acquisition.

Even if learning through play is often thought to be more appropriate for preschool settings and incompatible with primary education, play-based learning is widely recognized as a valuable pedagogical practice within schools, primary classes often lack the opportunity to integrate play-based learning activities nor the resources necessary to support them. (Xiaoyan, Kangas 2024)² Unfortunately, primary school is still too tied to a formal learning methodology, when, in reality, play is very present in children's lives. Playful activities such as role-playing, Bingo, Scrabble, dramatizations, digital storytelling, picture books, and board games can stimulate motivation, engagement, and attention (in addition to naturally consolidating vocabulary and grammatical structures).

It is also important to keep in mind that the transition from preschool to primary school involves a complete change in learning styles, as children move from a context where they're free to move and play freely to the one where (in most cases) they must sit still at their desks, passively listening to the teacher. In this context play could be an effective way not only to promote language learning, but also to ensure continuity from one school level to the next.

While in elementary school, simple activities such as reading picture books, using puppets, or simple movement games are effective in capturing and maintaining attention, the situation is different in secondary school and with adults. In these latter

² For more details see

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03004279.2024.2416954#abstract> . Last accessed 12.10.2025.

two contexts, the challenge is not so much attracting attention as overcoming psychological barriers, leveraging prior skills, and giving meaning to learning, and gamification can be a valuable support in this regard. The risk of appearing childish, banal, and inappropriate must be avoided at all costs, making the activity a support for language learning. This is also because the playful element does not negate the seriousness of the language learning process, but rather enhances it.

Alongside board games and dramatizations, more complex play experiences could be offered, such as guided debates, peer-to-peer conversations, or cooperative activities. However, this often fails to happen, partly because of the widespread belief that converting learning activities into games can detract from their seriousness. In reality, seriousness lies not in the formality of the teaching proposal, but rather in the motivation and active participation demonstrated by students, which ensure a more lasting internalization.

Even in adult language learning, play plays a strategic role, despite the persistent prejudice that associates it exclusively with childhood. Playful activities are, in fact, a powerful tool for reducing anxiety and frustration, common among adult learners, as they foster a more informal and collaborative learning environment. Through professional role-playing games, traditional games, language escape rooms, board games, interactive quizzes, and word games, adult learners have the opportunity to use language in real-world communicative situations, stimulating oral production and linguistic reflection. Games like Taboo or Pictionary stimulate conversation and vocabulary retrieval, while Story Cubes requires participants to create a story from random images, fostering creativity and narrative ability while strengthening linguistic fluency. Gamification, which involves the use of video game techniques and theories that allow us to "redesign" people's experiences in non-gaming contexts. It is not about transforming activities into games; the basic concept is applying game logic (use of avatars, challenges, missions, levels, scores, etc.) to activities to make them more engaging. This proposal is based not only on Koster's Fun Theory, according to which people more easily modify their behavior when they're having fun, but above all on learning by doing.

3. Conclusions

This shift from formal passive learning to learning "through play" can transform the approach to a foreign language into a more playful but less rigorous experience: students do not just memorize vocabulary or grammatical rules, but activate their communication skills, reflect on their language choices, and receive immediate feedback in realistic simulated contexts.

In language learning, the student's emotional involvement is an essential condition, and play succeeds in ensuring this, while dynamically promoting the

development of linguistic skills, demonstrating that it is not simply a form of childish entertainment. For this reason, both for young learners and adult language training, using games could be an excellent strategy for maintaining high motivation and engagement, while simultaneously promoting language learning.

At all ages, play proves to be a powerful teaching strategy, capable of combining engagement, fun, and learning not just merely an embellishment of the learning process, but a fundamental component in achieving student success.

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