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

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Abstract:

This study explores Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers' perspectives on the integration of a play-based approach in phonics instruction. Employing a case-study methodology, the research investigates the perceptions of EFL teachers, the methods they use to incorporate play-based techniques into phonics lessons, and the challenges and opportunities they face in implementing these approaches. The findings reveal that while teachers generally recognize the potential of play-based phonics instruction to enhance student engagement and learning, they experience a tension between enthusiasm for play and the need to align it with traditional academic objectives. This highlights the necessity for professional development and strategies to balance innovative teaching methods with measurable academic outcomes. Institutional and environmental factors, including resource availability, classroom design, administrative support, and parental attitudes, play a significant role in the adoption of play-based phonics instruction. Despite some progress, challenges such as limited resources and conflicting priorities underscore the need for clear guidelines, collaborative practices, and increased parental involvement. Additionally, the study confirms that interactive and play-based methods, such as multisensory activities, storytelling, and movement, effectively enhance phonics instruction by catering to diverse learning styles and fostering cognitive and linguistic development. The research concludes that integrating play-based learning with phonics instruction in EFL contexts offers a promising approach for improving student engagement, phonics acquisition, and retention, though it requires careful navigation of cultural norms, institutional expectations, and resource constraints.

Keywords: Play-Based Learning, Phonics Instruction, EFL Teachers

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, Lehr, & Osborn, 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 (Stahl, 2011). Before introducing play-based learning, it is important to acknowledge that phonics instruction not only lays the groundwork for literacy but also 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, providing a dynamic context for them to explore, experiment, discover, and interact with their environment. In this approach, children engage in activities that are enjoyable, meaningful, and often self-directed, allowing them to develop cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills in a holistic manner (Wood, 2014).

Play-based learning emphasizes active engagement, creativity, and the integration of 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 not only fosters critical thinking and problem-solving abilities but also 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 to 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, methodologies of language instruction are increasingly being challenged by innovative strategies that seek to enhance learner engagement and phonemic awareness through play.

The concept of 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. Vygotsky's theory of play, for instance, 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 face difficulties in mastering 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 the development of phonemic awareness and phonological skills. As such, there is a growing recognition of the need to explore alternative instructional strategies that can make phonics instruction more engaging and effective.

The play-based approach to teaching phonics holds promise in this regard. By incorporating elements of play, such as games, storytelling, and interactive activities, educators can create a more dynamic and motivating learning environment. This approach not only makes the learning process enjoyable but also 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, the adoption of 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. Understanding Chinese EFL teachers' perspectives on using play-based methods for teaching phonics is therefore essential for identifying barriers and facilitators to its implementation. Research in this area is still emerging, with few studies specifically addressing the nuanced views and experiences of Chinese EFL teachers 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. By doing so, it 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 the advancement of effective and engaging language teaching practices in China and beyond.

The integration of play-based learning in English language teaching, particularly in the context of 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 their confidence in using 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 study aims to address this gap by investigating Chinese EFL teachers' perspectives on the use of play-based methods for phonics instruction. Through qualitative interviews and classroom observations, the study seeks to uncover teachers' beliefs, experiences, challenges, and successes related to implementing play-based phonics activities. By examining teachers' perspectives comprehensively, the study aims to illuminate how play-based approaches can be effectively integrated into Chinese EFL classrooms to enhance phonics instruction.

By bridging the gap between theory and practice, this research aims to contribute valuable insights to educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in China and beyond. The findings are expected to inform the design of professional development programs, curriculum adaptations, and policy recommendations aimed at promoting 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. This study therefore

aimed to explore Chinese EFL teachers' perspectives on the use of a play-based approach to teaching phonics. It examined Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions of the play-based approach in phonics instruction. It identified the methods employed by Chinese EFL teachers when integrating the play-based approach into their phonics lessons, and analyzed the dynamics of implementation, including both the challenges and opportunities encountered by Chinese EFL teachers in using play-based methods for phonics instruction.

Methods

This study uses a case-study method. A case study method 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). In this research, however, the objective is to capture the broader perspectives of Chinese EFL teachers. A case study with four multiple cases could also be justified for this research. This approach allows for a deep dive into the specific contexts and experiences of each teacher, potentially revealing rich details and unique perspectives that a survey might miss. By carefully selecting four teachers with diverse backgrounds (grade level, experience, location), the study explored 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 as a whole.

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 are likely a blend of traditional architecture and modern cityscape, reflecting China's rapid development and cultural heritage.

The core instrument for this case study is an in-depth interview. A semi-structured interview guide was 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. Classroom observations provided valuable context to complement the interviews. Researchers gained a deeper understanding of their practices by observing how the teachers integrate or don't integrate play and phonics activities.

Findings and Discussion
A.   Thematization
I.   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 posi-

tive 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 constructivist 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.

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.

II.   Methods Employed by Chinese EFL Teachers when Integrating the Play-Based Approach into their Phonics Lessons.

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.

III. Dynamics of Implementation, Including Both the Challenges and Opportunities Encountered by Chinese EFL Teachers in Using Play-Based Methods for Phonics Instruction.

Theme 7: Challenges in Implementing Play-Based 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.

B. Cross-Case Analysis

Structural Theme 1: Overall Attitudes Toward Play-Based Approaches in Phonics Instruction

This theme examines the varying perceptions and attitudes of the teacher participants regarding the use of play-based approaches in phonics instruction. The analysis reveals a blend of enthusiasm, cautious optimism, and practical concerns, reflecting the complexity of integrating play-based methods in structured educational settings.

Teacher A's enthusiastic endorsement of play-based approaches aligns closely with developmental theories that advocate for play as a critical element in early childhood education. Vygotsky (1967) famously argued that play is a key vehicle for cognitive and social development, asserting that it helps children internalize abstract concepts by embedding them within a familiar and enjoyable context. Play, in this sense, is not merely an extracurricular activity, but an essential process for cognitive growth. Teacher A's belief that play motivates students and enhances retention mirrors educational psychology findings, which stress the importance of engagement and enjoyment in the learning process. Rogers (2011) emphasizes that students are more likely to retain information when they actively engage in the learning process, as play fosters intrinsic motivation. This view aligns with Vygotsky's (1967) theory that social interactions, such as those encouraged through play, are integral to learning. Thus, Teacher A's perspective reflects the developmental benefits of play, suggesting that it not only fosters engagement but also supports deeper, more sustained learning.

However, Teacher B's reservations about the integration of play-based learning with measurable learning outcomes highlight a common tension in educational systems that emphasize accountability. The pressure to demonstrate clear, quantifiable results often leads educators to question the efficacy of play-based approaches, which may not always align with standardized assessment practices (Khalil et al., 2022). Teacher B's concerns about balancing play with measurable outcomes echo a broader debate within educational research regarding the challenges of implementing play in settings that prioritize structured,

results-driven approaches (Adams, 1994). While Teacher B acknowledges the potential benefits of play, the concern lies in its alignment with the formal goals of education, which are typically framed around academic achievements that can be easily measured. This view invites further exploration of how educational frameworks can incorporate play without compromising the integrity of assessment practices. Teacher C introduces a more nuanced approach by stressing the importance of purposeful play. According to Parker and Thomsen (2019), play-based learning can only be truly effective if it is aligned with clear pedagogical objectives. This perspective emphasizes the need for intentional design in play-based instruction, ensuring that the activities serve a strategic purpose in the context of phonics learning. The concept of purposeful play resonates with the notion that engagement and learning outcomes are not mutually exclusive. By intentionally structuring play activities, educators can strike a balance between fun and focus, ensuring that play-based learning serves the dual purpose of fostering enjoyment while promoting academic progress. Teacher C's stance supports the idea that play-based learning is most effective when it is thoughtfully designed and clearly linked to specific learning goals.

Teacher D takes a more balanced, neutral stance, highlighting the need for adaptability in applying play-based approaches to cater to diverse student needs. This view resonates with Tomlinson's (2001) work on differentiated instruction, which emphasizes the importance of adapting teaching methods to meet the individual needs of students. Teacher D's perspective suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to play may not work for every student. Instead, educators must remain flexible, modifying play-based strategies to suit different learning profiles. This aligns with research by Rosenshine (2010), who notes that effective teaching requires a thoughtful combination of strategies, where differentiation plays a critical role in meeting students' diverse needs. By adapting play-based approaches, teachers can ensure that each student benefits from the engaging, hands-on nature of play while receiving the appropriate level of support and challenge.

Structural Theme 2: Influences on Play-Based Phonics Instruction in Chinese EFL Classrooms

Institutional and environmental support plays a crucial role in determining the extent to which Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers adopt play-based approaches in phonics instruction. This theme is shaped by several factors, including school policies, administrative support, and peer collaboration, which influence teachers' willingness to experiment with innovative teaching methods.

Research by Vygotsky (1967) supports the notion that play-based learning, a method rooted in creativity and engagement, is instrumental in fostering various developmental aspects in children. However, the lack of formal guidelines for play-based learning in some schools, as observed by Teacher A (P1), often leads to inconsistent practices. This observation aligns with the findings of Khalil et al. (2022), who argue that the absence of a universally accepted definition of "play" complicates the implementation of play-based learning in educational settings. Teachers are often left to interpret and apply these methods at their discretion, which may lead to varying levels of effectiveness.

In contrast, more restrictive institutional environments, as described by Teacher B (P2), hinder the adoption of play-based approaches. School administrations that prioritize traditional teaching methods tend to limit opportunities for teachers to explore innovative approaches, particularly those perceived as less academically rigorous. The cultural expectation for academic achievement in China, where education is highly structured, further exacerbates this challenge (Parker & Thomsen, 2019). This societal pressure aligns with the broader criticism of play-based learning being seen as less "serious" or "structured" (Teacher D, P4), which can contribute to resistance from both administrators and parents.

However, when schools promote a culture of collaboration, as noted by Teacher C (P3), teachers are more

likely to experiment with play-based strategies. Peer collaboration during team meetings provides teachers with opportunities to share ideas and resources, creating a more supportive environment for adopting innovative methods. This collaborative approach is consistent with the perspective of Rogers (2011), who emphasizes the importance of social interaction in early childhood education. Furthermore, the positive influence of supportive colleagues and peer-driven innovation may counterbalance the lack of formal institutional backing.

Institutional and environmental factors—such as school policies, administrative attitudes, and peer collaboration—are crucial in shaping teachers' decisions to implement play-based approaches in phonics instruction. While some schools may provide flexibility and support, others may impose constraints that hinder the adoption of such methods. Therefore, fostering a collaborative culture and providing formal guidelines could enhance the integration of play-based learning in EFL classrooms.

Structural Theme 3: Interactive and Play-Based Approaches in Phonics Instruction

The integration of interactive and play-based activities in phonics instruction is increasingly emphasized by Chinese EFL teachers as an effective way to engage young learners. These methods are grounded in educational theories that emphasize the importance of active participation and hands-on learning, particularly for children in early developmental stages. According to Vygotsky (1967), "play is the leading source of development in the preschool years," which underlines the significance of incorporating play into educational practices for cognitive, emotional, and social development. This perspective is supported by Piaget (1951), who suggested that children's cognitive development occurs through active engagement with their environment, which can be facilitated through play-based activities. By incorporating interactive methods, teachers create a dynamic learning environment that supports both phonetic awareness and overall language development.

One of the most common strategies used by EFL teachers in China is the use of games and interactive activities that pair phonetic symbols with visual or physical cues. 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 statement highlights how phonics can be taught through multisensory activities that cater to different learning styles. This approach aligns with the work of Pica (1997), who emphasized that multisensory teaching strategies—those involving visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements—are particularly beneficial in language acquisition. In this case, the integration of games into phonics lessons serves not only to reinforce phonetic sounds but also to enhance student engagement, thereby making the learning process more enjoyable and effective.

In addition to games, another frequently employed strategy is the incorporation of movement into lessons, which has been shown to improve retention and focus. Teacher B (P2) described how she blends physical activity with phonics instruction: "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 technique aligns with research by Hall (2009), who highlighted that movement activities are not only fun for young learners but also support the development of motor skills and cognitive processes. Moreover, this approach is consistent with the theories of Gardner (1993), who proposed that bodily-kinesthetic intelligence plays a crucial role in how students learn and remember information. The combination of auditory and kinesthetic learning facilitates the retention of phonetic sounds by engaging multiple areas of the brain, fostering a deeper understanding.

Storytelling and role-playing are also central elements in play-based phonics instruction. Teacher C (P3) illustrated this approach, saying, "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 method, known as "story-based learning," has been widely supported in educational research as a way to contextualize abstract concepts, making them more relatable and memorable. According to Bruner (1996), the use of narrative in teaching supports not only cognitive development but also language acquisition, as it enables students to make connections between sounds, words, and their meanings in real-life contexts. By embedding phonics sounds into stories, teachers encourage students to understand and apply phonics in ways that are both meaningful and enjoyable.

Structural Theme 4: Balancing Play-Based Learning with Phonics Instruction in EFL Contexts

This structural theme delves into the challenges and potential benefits of integrating play-based learning with phonics instruction for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. While educators express a genuine interest in using playful methods to engage young learners, they face several obstacles that prevent widespread implementation of such techniques in Chinese educational settings. These obstacles range from cultural expectations and institutional pressures to time constraints and lack of resources. Despite these challenges, there are notable opportunities for using play-based learning as an effective strategy to promote phonics acquisition, student engagement, and long-term retention.

A key challenge mentioned by educators is the pressure to conform to traditional educational practices that emphasize exam preparation over creative teaching methods. Teacher A (P1) highlighted this issue, stating, "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 sentiment reflects the broader challenge in China's educational system, where the emphasis on high-stakes exams often undermines innovative teaching strategies such as play-based learning (Li & Wang, 2022).

Further complicating the adoption of play-based learning are the concerns regarding its perceived efficacy. Teacher B (P2) shared the difficulty of convincing parents and other stakeholders of the value of play in phonics instruction: "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 is a common issue in many education systems, where there is a preference for measurable outcomes over more qualitative approaches (Khalil et al., 2022). Parents often expect clear, measurable progress, which can make teachers hesitant to adopt methods that may not immediately yield quantifiable results, despite their long-term effectiveness.

Time constraints also present a significant challenge. As Teacher C (P3) noted, "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 observation points to the logistical difficulties teachers face in finding the time to incorporate playful methods in an already packed curriculum. The rigid schedules and high academic expectations leave little flexibility for the spontaneity that play-based activities require (Foege et al., 2006).

Despite these challenges, there are clear opportunities for play-based learning to enhance phonics instruction, particularly in terms of student engagement, motivation, and inclusive learning. Many teachers noted that students are more motivated and engaged when lessons incorporate elements of play. Teacher D (P4) remarked, "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 enthusiasm aligns with research highlighting the power of play to foster a positive and dynamic learning environment (Dau & Jones, 1999).

Teacher A (P1) shared an insight into how play-based learning helps students retain phonics knowledge, stating, "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 is consistent with findings in the literature that show play helps children form stronger, more durable connections with the material being taught, particularly when that material is connected to positive emotions and enjoyable experiences (Rogers, 2011).

Moreover, Teacher B (P2) recognized that play-based learning offers a more personalized and inclusive approach, which benefits students of varying proficiency levels. "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 is supported by research showing that play-based approaches foster an inclusive classroom environment where all learners, regardless of their abilities, can engage with the content (Parker & Thomsen, 2019).

C. Observations

1. Beliefs and Attitudes

Teacher expresses positive attitude towards play-based approaches in phonics instruction- All four observed teachers (4/4) exhibited a positive attitude towards using play-based methods for phonics instruction, indicating strong support for this teaching approach. None of the teachers (0/4) expressed a negative or indifferent stance, suggesting that the teachers are generally open to and supportive of play-based strategies in the classroom.

Teacher explains the benefits of play-based methods for student engagement and learning- Three out of four teachers (3/4) explained the benefits of play-based methods in enhancing student engagement and learning, emphasizing how these methods can increase motivation, retention, and active participation. However, one teacher (1/4) did not articulate the specific advantages of play-based methods, which may reflect either a lack of awareness or a different perspective on the effectiveness of these strategies.

Teacher shares personal experiences or stories supporting play-based learning- Two teachers (2/4) shared personal experiences or stories demonstrating the effectiveness of play-based learning in their classrooms. This suggests that while some teachers are comfortable drawing from their own practice to reinforce their approach, others may not have fully embraced the idea of using personal anecdotes as evidence. The remaining two teachers (2/4) did not share any such experiences, indicating a potential gap in using personal narratives to reinforce their teaching methods.

-Teacher demonstrates enthusiasm and confidence when using play-based activities: All four teachers (4/4) demonstrated enthusiasm and confidence when using play-based activities. This indicates that the teachers are not only supportive of the method but also actively engage with students in an energetic and assured manner. Their positive demeanor likely contributes to the effectiveness of the play-based approach in fostering student involvement and learning.

2. Contextual Factors

School Resources for Play-Based Phonics Instruction- The table indicates that most schools (3/4) provide adequate resources for play-based learning, including materials and tools necessary for engaging students in phonics activities. However, one teacher reported a lack of variety in available resources. This

suggests that while there is a general effort to equip classrooms with the necessary tools for play-based instruction, there might still be limitations in terms of the range and novelty of resources provided, which could affect the effectiveness and engagement of students.

Classroom Environment- All observed classrooms (4/4) were found to support play-based learning in terms of space and materials. This means that the physical environment, such as the layout of the classroom, the availability of interactive materials, and the overall atmosphere, is conducive to the successful implementation of play-based activities. Such an environment can help foster a more engaging and dynamic learning experience for students, especially in language acquisition through phonics.

Administrative Support- The majority of teachers (3/4) reported that the school administration supports play-based methods, which suggests a generally favorable attitude from school leadership towards innovative teaching practices. However, one teacher noted a conflicting pressure to meet standardized testing requirements, which may limit the full implementation of play-based approaches. This highlights a potential challenge in balancing administrative priorities with pedagogical innovation, as the emphasis on meeting academic benchmarks can sometimes undermine the adoption of alternative teaching methods.

Parental Attitudes- Parental attitudes towards play-based learning appear to be divided. While 2/4 teachers observed that parents are generally supportive of play-based methods, the same number of teachers (2/4) indicated that some parents remain more focused on traditional, outcome-oriented teaching methods. This divergence in parental views can create challenges for teachers trying to promote and implement play-based approaches. The resistance from some parents might stem from concerns about the perceived efficacy of play-based learning, especially in environments where academic success is highly prioritized. While the overall environment for play-based phonics instruction seems positive in terms of classroom resources and space, challenges remain in terms of administrative pressures and parental expectations. Addressing these challenges could further enhance the effectiveness of play-based approaches in phonics instruction.

3. **Strategies and Techniques**

Incorporation of a Variety of Play-Based Activities- The majority of teachers (3/4) demonstrated the use of a wide variety of play-based activities in their phonics instruction, ensuring that students were engaged through different methods. However, one teacher relied on a narrower set of activities, possibly limiting student interaction and engagement.

Age-Appropriate and Culturally Relevant Activities- All observed teachers ensured that the activities were both age-appropriate and culturally relevant, aligning well with the developmental stages of students and local contexts. This approach helps maintain relevance and ensures that students can relate to the materials used in phonics lessons.

Use of Games, Songs, and Interactive Activities- All teachers consistently incorporated games, songs, and other interactive activities into their teaching. These methods are effective in making phonics instruction enjoyable and can aid in better retention and application of language skills.

Adaptation of Activities Based on Student Needs- While most teachers (3/4) adapted their activities based on student needs, one teacher did not modify lessons sufficiently, which could hinder personalized learning. Adapting activities to meet the diverse needs of students is crucial for ensuring that all students progress at an appropriate pace.

Clarity of Instructions- All teachers were found to provide clear instructions, ensuring that students understood the expectations for each activity. This clarity is essential for effective play-based learning, as students need to know how to engage with each task to maximize their learning potential.

Assessment of Student Understanding and Progress- Most teachers (3/4) assessed students' understanding and provided feedback during activities, which is essential for identifying areas where students might need additional support. However, one teacher did not focus enough on formative assessment during activities, which could have impacted their ability to gauge student progress and provide timely support. The majority of teachers successfully implemented a variety of play-based activities in their phonics instruction, with a strong focus on engagement and adapting to student needs. However, there is room for improvement in consistent formative assessment and the customization of activities to suit individual student needs more effectively.

IV. Challenges and Opportunities

The teachers consistently identifies challenges related to play-based teaching, such as limited resources and classroom constraints, but actively adapts to these obstacles- For example, modifications were made to the pace and materials based on student engagement, ensuring that activities remained effective despite challenges. This adaptability shows the teacher's flexibility and commitment to creating a dynamic learning environment.

The teachers effectively capitalizes on opportunities to enhance phonics instruction. By incorporating teachable moments and expanding phonics-related activities, the teacher maximized the potential of play-based methods. This proactive approach demonstrates an ability to leverage the classroom environment for further engagement.

The teacher's commitment to professional growth is evident in their reflective practices-After each lesson, the teacher evaluates the effectiveness of the play-based approaches used and discusses plans for improvement. This ongoing self-assessment and desire for continuous improvement suggest a teacher who is dedicated to refining their practice and enhancing the learning experience for their students. The teachers appears highly engaged in implementing play-based phonics instruction, overcoming challenges with creativity and continually striving to improve the approach based on reflective practices.

D. Essential Insights on the EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Implementing a Play-Based Approach to Phonics Instruction

Positive Attitudes Toward Play-Based Approaches in Phonics Instruction

The theme across all four teachers demonstrate a positive attitude toward the use of play-based methods in phonics instruction. This general positivity aligns with a growing recognition in educational theory that play fosters engagement, motivation, and deeper learning, particularly in early education. The findings mirror Vygotsky's (1967) argument that play plays a crucial role in cognitive development and learning, suggesting that the teachers see value in using play to facilitate phonics learning. However, despite this overall enthusiasm, there is some nuance in the observations. Teacher B, in particular, shows reservations about integrating play with formal, measurable educational outcomes, which reflects a more cautious approach often found in contexts where accountability and standardized assessments are highly emphasized. This is a common challenge for educators who believe in the benefits of play but struggle to align it with performance metrics or academic expectations (Khalil et al., 2022). Thus, while the teachers are broadly supportive of play-based learning, there remains an undercurrent of concern regarding its integration with traditional educational goals.

The majority of the teachers (3/4) can articulate the benefits of play-based methods in phonics instruction, emphasizing how such approaches can increase student engagement, motivation, and retention. This aligns with existing literature that highlights the positive impact of play on student learning outcomes. Rogers

(2011) underscores the importance of student engagement in fostering intrinsic motivation, which is evident in the teachers' belief that play increases student participation and active involvement in the learning process. However, there is one teacher (1/4) who did not clearly explain the benefits of play-based learning, which might indicate either a lack of experience with the method or a more traditional perspective on teaching. This discrepancy suggests that while most teachers acknowledge the value of play in promoting engagement, there are still gaps in fully understanding or articulating its impact on learning. This could point to the need for professional development opportunities to deepen teachers' understanding of the theoretical and practical advantages of play-based instruction.

The sharing of personal experiences plays an important role in supporting and reinforcing play-based learning. Two of the teachers (2/4) were observed sharing personal anecdotes or stories that illustrated the effectiveness of play-based learning in their classrooms. This aligns with research suggesting that teachers who share personal stories can inspire their peers and encourage broader adoption of effective practices (Parker & Thomsen, 2019). The sharing of success stories also helps bridge the gap between theory and practice, making the approach more relatable and accessible to others. However, the remaining two teachers (2/4) did not share any personal experiences, which could suggest that they either prefer a more theoretical approach or may not yet have enough personal experience with play-based learning to share. This gap may represent a missed opportunity for peer learning and could point to a need for more collaborative environments where teachers feel comfortable exchanging practical experiences.

Institutional and Environmental Factors Influencing Play-Based Phonics Instruction in Chinese EFL Classrooms

The adoption and effectiveness of play-based phonics instruction in Chinese EFL classrooms are profoundly influenced by a confluence of institutional and environmental factors. These include the availability of resources, the physical and emotional classroom environment, administrative support, and parental attitudes. While promising strides have been made to support innovative pedagogical approaches, significant challenges persist, particularly in balancing traditional academic expectations with the potential benefits of play-based learning. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment for young learners in China.

Resources are foundational to the implementation of play-based learning, as they directly influence the methods and materials available to teachers. According to the observations, most schools (3/4) provide adequate tools and materials necessary for implementing engaging phonics instruction. This reflects an effort to incorporate interactive and student-centered learning techniques. However, as noted by one teacher (P1), the lack of variety and novelty in these resources can limit the effectiveness of play-based activities. This finding resonates with Khalil et al. (2022), who emphasize that the quality and diversity of resources play a critical role in sustaining student engagement and ensuring the success of play-based pedagogies. When resources are limited or monotonous, teachers may struggle to maintain students' interest, reducing the overall impact of these methods.

The classroom environment significantly shapes the success of play-based instruction. Observations revealed that all classrooms (4/4) were conducive to play-based learning, with layouts, materials, and interactive spaces designed to facilitate engagement. A well-structured and dynamic classroom environment is essential for fostering creativity, collaboration, and active learning. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1967) theory of social development, which highlights the importance of an interactive and enriching environment in supporting cognitive and language development. An open and engaging

classroom setting not only promotes student participation but also enhances the overall learning experience, particularly for young learners acquiring phonics skills.

he role of school administration in enabling play-based phonics instruction cannot be overstated. The majority of teachers (3/4) reported supportive attitudes from their school leadership, reflecting a growing recognition of innovative teaching practices. However, one teacher noted conflicting pressures to meet standardized testing requirements, a challenge that undermines the full implementation of play-based methods. This tension is consistent with the findings of Parker and Thomsen (2019), who argue that rigid educational policies and a heavy emphasis on academic outcomes often discourage experimentation with alternative pedagogical approaches. While administrative support can foster a culture of innovation, misaligned priorities, such as an overemphasis on test scores, may stifle teachers' willingness to adopt play-based learning.

Parental support is a critical factor in the success of play-based instruction, as it influences both teacher motivation and student participation. Teachers observed divided parental attitudes toward play-based learning: while some parents (2/4) were supportive, others (2/4) expressed skepticism, favoring traditional, outcome-driven teaching methods. This dichotomy highlights a broader cultural challenge in Chinese education, where academic achievement is often prioritized over holistic learning approaches. Vygotsky's (1967) emphasis on the importance of play in child development contrasts with parental concerns about its perceived lack of rigor. Addressing this divide requires schools and educators to actively engage parents, highlighting the long-term benefits of play-based learning in fostering critical thinking, creativity, and language acquisition.

Interactive and Play-Based Approaches Enhancing Phonics Instruction in Chinese EFL Classrooms

Interactive and play-based approaches in phonics instruction have become essential in the pedagogical practices of Chinese EFL teachers, reflecting their alignment with established educational theories and practical classroom observations. These methods emphasize the importance of active participation, hands-on learning, and contextualized instruction to engage young learners effectively and foster holistic development. Drawing from Vygotsky's (1967) assertion that "play is the leading source of development in the preschool years" and Piaget's (1951) theory of cognitive development through active engagement with the environment, these strategies ensure that young learners are not only engaged but are also developing foundational skills that support lifelong learning.

A key finding from the triangulation of data is the integration of a variety of interactive strategies, such as games, storytelling, role-playing, songs, and movement-based activities, into phonics lessons. These methods align with the concept of multisensory learning as proposed by Pica (1997), who emphasized the effectiveness of teaching strategies that engage visual, auditory, and kinesthetic senses simultaneously. For example, Teacher A (P1) illustrated the use of word-matching games that combine visual representations with phonetic symbols, ensuring students connect sounds with images in an engaging and enjoyable manner. Similarly, Teacher B (P2) highlighted the incorporation of singing and physical activities, supporting Hall's (2009) findings that movement enhances memory retention and motor skill development.

These strategies are not only theoretically grounded but are also supported by research on early childhood education. Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences underscores the importance of bodily-kinesthetic intelligence in young learners, which can be effectively harnessed through movement-based activities. Furthermore, Lillard (2017) emphasized the cognitive and linguistic benefits of play, which include the development of problem-solving skills, cognitive flexibility, and language acquisition. By

creating a dynamic learning environment through these approaches, teachers cater to diverse learning styles and help students build phonetic awareness in meaningful and memorable ways.

Storytelling and role-playing, as described by Teacher C (P3) and Teacher D (P4), further demonstrate the effectiveness of contextualized and socially interactive strategies in phonics instruction. These methods allow students to connect abstract phonetic sounds to real-world situations, a process supported by Bruner's (1996) narrative learning theory. Bruner argued that storytelling aids in cognitive and linguistic development by enabling students to construct meaning through stories that incorporate phonics sounds. Role-playing complements this by fostering social interaction and collaborative learning, which Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory identifies as critical for language development. Acting out stories also engages students' imagination and symbolic thinking, as highlighted by Piaget (1951), which is essential for understanding the relationship between sounds and symbols in language learning.

Observational data, as summarized in Table 7, corroborate these findings. The majority of Chinese EFL teachers demonstrated a strong ability to incorporate diverse play-based activities into their phonics instruction, ensuring that lessons were age-appropriate, culturally relevant, and engaging. For instance, all teachers consistently utilized games, songs, and interactive activities, reflecting their awareness of strategies that resonate with young learners. However, the observations also identified areas for improvement. While most teachers adapted their activities to meet the individual needs of students, some lacked sufficient customization, which could limit the inclusivity and effectiveness of their teaching. Similarly, formative assessment practices varied, with some teachers failing to provide timely feedback or gauge students' understanding during activities.

The research literature underscores the importance of these practices in early literacy instruction. Roskos and Neuman (2012) found that phonics instruction is most effective when students actively engage with the material through interactive and hands-on activities. Furthermore, the use of culturally relevant content, as observed among Chinese EFL teachers, aligns with recommendations from Gay (2010) on culturally responsive teaching. Gay emphasized that aligning instructional content with students' cultural contexts enhances their engagement and facilitates deeper learning.

Balance Between Play-based Learning and Phonics Instruction in EFL Contexts

Integrating play-based learning with phonics instruction in EFL classrooms offers significant potential for enhancing student engagement, phonics acquisition, and long-term retention, despite substantial challenges tied to cultural norms, institutional expectations, and resource limitations. Teachers who navigate this complex interplay must balance the rigidity of traditional, exam-focused educational practices with the flexibility and creativity required for implementing playful, student-centered methodologies.

A recurring theme is the tension between cultural and institutional pressures to produce measurable academic outcomes and the pedagogical value of play-based methods. Many teachers reported facing constraints such as packed schedules, insufficient resources, and the need to meet parental expectations for quantifiable results. These limitations often discourage the adoption of play-based activities, which, while effective in promoting deep learning, are perceived as informal or nonessential in traditional educational frameworks (Li & Wang, 2022; Khalil et al., 2022). For example, one teacher noted the difficulty in allocating time for play-based learning within rigid curriculum structures, while another highlighted challenges in convincing parents of its efficacy. However, the opportunities offered by play-based phonics instruction are equally compelling. Teachers observed that students displayed increased motivation and engagement when learning through play, particularly when games or role-playing activities

were integrated into lessons. Research supports this, showing that play facilitates stronger connections with learning material by linking it to positive emotions and enjoyable experiences (Rogers, 2011; Dau & Jones, 1999). Additionally, play-based approaches allow for differentiated instruction, enabling teachers to cater to students of varying proficiency levels, thus fostering inclusivity in the classroom (Parker & Thomsen, 2019).

Crucially, effective implementation of play-based phonics instruction depends on the adaptability and professional commitment of teachers. Educators demonstrated flexibility by modifying materials and pacing activities to suit their students' needs, ensuring engagement despite systemic obstacles. They also capitalized on teachable moments to extend phonics-related activities, maximizing learning opportunities. Reflective practices further highlighted their dedication to professional growth; teachers frequently assessed the effectiveness of their strategies, sought feedback, and iterated on their methods for continuous improvement.

The structural theme of balancing play-based learning with phonics instruction thus underscores the need for systemic changes to support innovative teaching methods. While teachers face cultural and institutional barriers, their creativity, adaptability, and reflective practices position them as pivotal agents of change. By fostering environments that embrace both traditional rigor and playful creativity, educators can unlock the full potential of play-based learning to transform phonics instruction and enhance the EFL learning experience (Adams, 1994; Moats, 2009; Hesterman & Targowska, 2020).

Conclusions

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.

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