Play for real in early years language education
Sandie Mourão

1. The questions

- What is play and why is it important for children to play in English?
- What is the difference between adult-led and child-initiated play?
- How can I help children play in English?
- What resources do I need to enable play in English?

2. Some research

What is play?

"Play is an approach to action, not a form of activity" (Bruner, 1977, p. v.).

Play has been defined as, "a child's work and the means whereby he grows and develops" (Isaacs, 1949: 9). It is generally agreed that what distinguishes play from other activities is imagination, pretense, children's choices and control of the activity, children's motivation, and imaginative and symbolic activity. Play involves being in 'what if? and 'as if' modes which provide opportunities for imaginative and flexible ways of thinking and acting (Wood, 2010). Nevertheless, in educational settings play should have learning consequences.

Teachers can plan *for* children's play, but they cannot plan children's play. Adult interaction in play can be seen along a continuum - at one end adults are indirectly involved as planners of play, they are managers, organising the resources, the space and time to promote quality play. At the other end they are directly involved in the play as mediators, engaging in parallel play, co-playing or play tutoring (Kernan, 2007: 11). If a teacher is to be seen as an enabler or initiator of learning, and not merely as an instructor and imparter of knowledge, then play can and should occur in two forms: adult-led play, where adults make the choices about what to do and child-initiated play is where children decide what, how and who with in relation to play. Child-initiated play is defined as "the opportunity to explore materials and situations for oneself" (Moyles, 1989: 14). Through child-initiated play children become responsible for their learning; they are allowed to experiment, make errors, choose and make their own decisions; they are respected as autonomous learners (Bruce, 2011: 47). Child initiated play does not usually involve adults.

Socio-constructivist approaches to learning depict that instruction should occur in both formal and informal contexts and be performed by more knowledgeable peers, siblings or adults (Vygotsky, 1978).
- Formal contexts are adult-led, involving adults and children: there is a planned learning intention and children are guided.
- Informal contexts are more likely to be child-initiated and involve peers though the setting might have been structured by an adult; children will choose to play in these settings and play will take on the characteristics described above.

If we look at an English in a pre-primary context, given for one or two hours a week, by a teacher of English who is not the children's pre-primary teacher / educator, play will occur in a formal, adult-led context, albeit using playful activities. The provision of an informal learning context, allowing for child-initiated play is rare.

English learning areas in pre-primary classrooms: An investigation of their effectiveness
by Penelope Robinson, Sandie Mourão and Nam Joon Kang

A pre-primary room that adopts a more child-directed, social, pedagogic approach to early-years education is set up with different 'learning areas' or activity centres. This arrangement enables children to move from teacher-led group-work, often during circle time or table time, to child-initiated play in the learning areas. These areas allow for structured child-initiated play: that is, play that occurs when children engage in certain resources put at their disposal with an educational objective e.g. building blocks, puzzles, weighing apparatus. An English learning area (ELA) is one of these learning areas, set up to promote child-initiated play in English outside of the formal, teacher-led English session.

Robinson, Mourão and Kang (2015) researched the effectiveness of a ELAs, building on earlier research by Mourão. Setting up ELAs in low exposure settings in Portugal and South Korea they obtained qualitative data showing that children enjoyed playing in ELAs and interacted in English with the resources they found there (including puppets, picturebooks and story cards, flashcards, props for role plays, bingo games, board games, thematic wall posters and folders of children's drawings).

Based on their observations of children, Robinson, Mourão and Kang suggest that the resources in the ELA stimulated memories of teacher-led English sessions. They observed children re-enacting teacher-led activities, taking on the role of teacher and student and replicating familiar sequences of English associated with teacher-led activities and the resources (p. 28). In Portugal, children were observed labelling objects and pictures using English, an activity that they enjoyed immensely and which was prompted by certain resources e.g. flashcards, bingo games, board games and picturebooks. They also used formulaic language, which came directly from the teacher-led activities during circle time. In several instances the children embedded an English word or chunk into a Portuguese sentence, which ensures children can confidently proceed participate.

Play in the ELAs also prompted experimental use of English, which implies children are creative with English during play. In Portugal, children were observed scaffolding each other in novice / expert interactions during child-initiated play in

English, as well as making the most of their linguistic repertoires by using both Portuguese and English, thus assuring peer interaction was successful.

Mourão (2018) suggests that during teacher-led activity the repetition of certain games and game-like activities using different topic-based lexical sets, together with the teacher handing over to children, so they can lead activities (e.g. become the teacher and ask questions and make decisions) ensures that children become familiar with the structure of the game and its basic script. The structure and scripts remain unchanged in each game and once acquired, mean the children only have to be concerned with remembering the different lexical sets to be able to play the games with peers and without the teacher of English.

3. Ideas to think about

What is an English Learning Area?

Many (European) pre-primary schools are set out in activity / learning centers, which are equipped with developmentally appropriate materials for young children to play with and manipulate. Socio-constructivist theories believe learning and development occur when young children interact with the environment and people around them, and learning centers give children the opportunity to engage in different learning experiences, often experiences which are thought to be appropriate in terms of content (a house area; a writing area, a reading area, a construction area, a water area) or topic area (a hospital, a shop, a travel agents). These areas are influenced by the work the Belgian educationalist Ovide Decroly (centers of activity) and Italian Maria Montessori who believed children should engage in real, self-chosen tasks, but tasks with which they were already familiar.

An English learning area (ELA) is one of these areas, and set up for children to play in English. In the ELA children interact with English materials and engage in child-initiated play with peers or alone. An ELA should be resourced with whatever a teacher uses with the children to support their English learning during teacher- led activities. Most likely flashcards, which can be used for any number of games the children will play with the teacher and can subsequently play in the ELA. But also, any other resources, e.g. the English puppet, sets of bingo, a dice; masks; story props; story cards; picturebooks; posters for songs and rhymes etc.

How does it work?
If we analyse games and game-like activities in our pre-primary English sessions, we see they contain 'formats', 'a routinized and repeated interaction in which [adults and children] *do* things […] together using language' (Bruner 1983: 132). It is the formats in many of the activities and games we use in English sessions which enable children to acquire language and then take this language into the ELA.

If we dissect a format we will find that it contains three key components:
1. a sequential structure;
2. clearly marked roles;
3. scripts to support communication

An example of a typical format is the game "Peek-a-boo!", which parents play with their babies all over the world.
This is the format of the Peekaboo game:

A sequential structure	1. Mummy looks at baby 2. Mummy covers her face 3. Mummy uncovers her face 4. Baby reacts
Clearly marked roles	Hider Seeker
Scripts to support communication	Mummy: *Peek a boo!* Baby and mummy: *Laugh*

This is the format of a flashcard game - 'Memory game' (or Kim's game)

Memory game

A sequential structure	1. Flashcards are laid out. 2. Children cover their eyes, so they can't see. 3. A flashcard is removed / turned over. 4. Children are asked to say what is missing.
Clearly marked roles	A leader (turning over flashcards) A looker (remembering what was there)
Scripts to support communication	Leader: Cover your eyes! Open your eyes! What's missing? Looker: It's a [car]. Leader: Is it a car? Yes, it is! / No, it isn't!

All the activities and games in our pre-primary English classes have clearly defined formats and we need to be aware of these as we initiate the activities, so that we can help children become familiar with the structure of an activity, memorise its scripts and also experience the roles. As such, children also need to be given the opportunity to lead activities and games, getting used to all roles and their associated scripts. This is referred to by Bruner as the 'handover principle' (1983: 60) and involves setting up an activity to facilitate a child's scaffolded entry to ensure their 'ineptitudes can be rescued or rectified by appropriate intervention' (ibid). The scaffold is removed little by little as the child demonstrates an ability to proceed alone.

Children often imitate the games and game-like activities while in the ELA, and it is the format of these activities that helps them do this.

Adult-led play supporting child-initiated play
The relationship between adult-led play and child-initiated play is shown in the adaptation of Moyles' "play spiral" (1989, p. 16) (see Figure 1). It demonstrates how play supports learning and language acquisition. Children need language to play in English, so this spiral begins with directed, adult-led play. Children engage in directed, adult-led play in English with the teacher of English; they are exposed to formats during play-like activities. Once the English session is over children move into child-initiated, free play mode, interacting with the English materials in the English learning area. Regular sessions of English provide opportunities for mastering those structures, roles and scripts that make up the routine activities and games, and children go on to restructure their learning during subsequent child-initiated, free play. This leads to a accretion, that is growth in language use and knowledge.
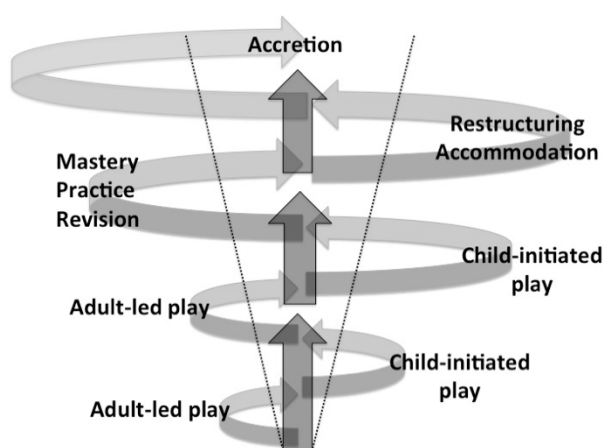

Figure 1: The Play (in English) spiral (Mourão, 2014: 257)

The different contexts
There are a variety of contexts in which children are given opportunities to encounter English:
- **a)** A visiting teacher who only teaches English
- **b)** A pre-primary practitioner who also teaches English
- **c)** A language institute teacher of English

Child-initiated play in ELAs may be slightly different depending on the kind of English experience children are having.

1. A visiting teacher who only teaches English
This is a situation which is common in some European countries (e.g. Portugal, Spain and Cyprus). This is often seen as a great opportunity for children to experience another person, a person who brings something new and exciting to their learning experiences. Although it can also separate learning unless teacher of English and pre-primary practitioner collaborate.

A teacher of English in this situation is often teaching English to several pre-primary classes or even schools, and rushes from one place to another. This teacher will work with different pre-primary practitioners and may even plan to accompany the each group of children's everyday learning (this is a good thing). These teachers have big bags full of resources and they may use the same resources with all their groups of children e.g. one puppet, one set of animal flashcards. However, to enable child-initiated play the children need to access the resources once the teacher of English has left the class / school. They also need a space which can be called an ELA.

Implications are that:
- a) resources need to be made so they can stay in the room with the children
- b) collaboration is essential between the teacher of English and the pre-primary practitioner, so that a space can be set up, used and monitored during child-initiated play opportunities

2. *A pre-primary practitioner who also teaches English*

This situation is becoming common in some European countries (e.g. France, Italy and Poland). A pre-primary practitioner in this situation is responsible for everything and, though this is a challenge, it is also very useful as this practitioner can make connections between everyday learning and English and create a space for an ELA as part of the room plan. Additional resources need to be made, but everything is the responsibility of the pre-primary practitioner.

Implications are that:
 a) ELA resources are associated with English e.g. an English puppet, a set of English flashcards, an English game. Anecdotal evidence has shown that if children experience a resource in their L1 first, they are more likely to resort to using the L1 when playing with it. The resource prompts memories of either the teacher-led activity or the language associated with that resource.

3. *A language institute teacher of English*

This situation is also becoming widespread. Pre-primary children are attending language institutes, often at the end of the day. A teacher of English here will have any number of groups from pre-primary through to adults and there will be no special room for English with pre-primary. Sessions may last for around an hour, but can last longer, especially if held on Saturday mornings.

Longer lessons need to be planned to include lots of variety, so that a ten-minute child-initiated, free play session can be incorporated along with circle-time and table-time activities. To do this, set up mini-learning areas or activity centres, using resources the children are already familiar with – so they know what to do with the resource and they can associate it with English. Create these activity centres in different parts of the room and present each to the children, letting them choose where they want to play. You may need to limit the number of children in certain areas, depending on the size of the group and their interests, and you can agree on this with the children.

The following example comes from a language school in Spain: As a ten-minute follow-up activity after table time, the teacher set up areas in the classroom with the following resources – an interactive whiteboard game, a dice game, a puppet, a poster, big book of stories, mini-cards and some phonic and picture flashcards. As children finished the table activity, they chose an area. The teacher commented on the amount of English they used, or demonstrated they understood, and the extent to which they helped each other use the language. She also noted how autonomous the children were in proceeding with the activities they had chosen.

Implications are that:
 a) ELA resources need to be set up and cleared away, so careful planning for storage may be necessary. However, children can also help with this and will enjoy the responsibility
 b) Children should be involved in the democratic decisions related to how many children are allowed to access a particular activity centre. This may have to be organised in the L1.
 c) Reflecting on what the children did and how they used English during their play is an important follow up activity, so once children have helped you tidy up the activity centres, together in circle time you can ask them to remember where they played e.g. *'In the book centre', 'in the flashcard centre'*; what they did e.g. *'Read Brown Bear', 'Play memory game'*; who they played with e.g. *'With Sofia'*; how well they used English e.g. *'Very well'; 'A little'*. These reflections will help the children take the activity centres seriously and also help them to understand the importance of using English in their play.
 d) You may need to inform the school direction and parents of the relevance of play for language learning and provide a short explanation of what you are doing.

4 . Bibliography

- Bruce, T. 2011. *Early Childhood Education* (4th edition.). Abingdon: Hodder Education
- Bruner, J. 1977. Introduction. In Tizard, B. & Harvey, D. (Eds.), *The Biology of Play*. London: Spastics International Medical Publications.
- Bruner, J. 1983. *Child's talk: Learning to use language.* New York: Norton.
- Isaacs, S. 1949. *The Nursery Years: the Mind of the Child from Birth to Six Years*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- Kernan, M. 2007. Play as a context for early learning and development. A research paper. Dublin: NCCA.
- Moyles, J. 1989. *Just Playing?: The Role and Status of Play in Early Childhood Education.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Robinson, P., Mourão, S. & Kang, N-J. (2015). *English Learning Areas in pre-primary classrooms: an investigation of their effectiveness.* London: British Council. Online. Available HTTP: https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/english -learning-areas-pre-primary-classrooms-investigation- their-effectiveness
- Vygotsky, L (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wood, E. 2010. 'New Directions in Play: Learning, Pedagogy and Curriculum'. Plenary speech, Froebel College Early Childhood Conference, Dublin, May 21st 2010.

Two online resources you may find interesting:
- Mourão, S. (2015). Learning English is child's play – how to leave them to it. *Voices*, 18.11.2015. Online. Available HTTP: https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices- magazine/learning-english-childs-play
- Murphy, V. and Evangelou, M. (Eds). (2016). *Early Childhood Education in English for Speakers of Other Languages.* London: British Council. Online. Available HTTP: *https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/ files/F240%20Early%20Childhood%20Education%20inners %20FINAL%20web.pdf*