

# An Ethnographic Study: The Role of “Play” in the Development of English Listening and Speaking Ability of Two Chinese Children in a Multilingual Setting

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**Abstract:** Much scholarship on “play” activities has focused on enhancing children’s learning processes and developing interest towards learning second language<sup>[1]</sup>. Many of these studies, however, adopt the survey to conduct their study. This study explored how “play with local kids” activities effect the development of English speaking and listening of two Chinese children in the Philippines, employing an ethnographically based approach to observe the two participants playing with local kids, which lasted about 4 months. The findings of the study revealed that “play” activities can not only help young children have a better understanding of their English conversations, and make them have more confidence to speak English, but also inspire them to speak English in such environment. In view of the results, it is obvious that “play with local kids” is a very good way for young children to acquire a second language in a multilingual setting. It is strongly recommended that language researchers and teachers should pay more attention and do more research on the relationship between “play” and second language acquisition.

**Keywords:** Ethnographic study, Play, Listening and speaking, Multilingual setting

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## 1 Introduction

Play is important for children’s development in the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being,

especially in enhancing children’s learning processes and interest towards learning second language<sup>[1]</sup>. The interaction of social activity of learners with peers is considered as the best method of Second Language Acquisition<sup>[2]</sup>.

The role of play has been widely studied by various scholars. Most researches focus on the following aspects: “play” teaching method in the school context, the effects of the play method on interest and motivation in learning, the role of play in vocabulary learning.

Some scholars do some investigations on “play” teaching method in the school context”. General speaking, teachers especially in the preschool often makes full use of various methods in the process of teaching. Deubel (2006) pointed out that the play way method, the best way to stimulate the nerve cells in a child’s brain, is beneficial to the children’s interactions<sup>[3]</sup>. According to Smith & Connolly (1973), the play method in class could improve the learning process and social interaction among children<sup>[4]</sup>. Saayah (2008) conducted a study on the effectiveness of using the play method in five kindergartens in Melaka, Malaysia, finding that teachers lacked knowledge on the play method<sup>[5]</sup>.

There are many scholars focus on the effects of the play method on interest and motivation in learning. Play is a good way to make children learn through experience, gain confidence and self-esteem and also develops interest towards learning language.

Many researches have proved that children’s active involving in the learning process can enhance their interest and motivation to that subject. The research result of Lei and Huang (2012) showed that musicals could help the students to be more confident in the

process of learning English as a second language<sup>[6]</sup>. A study by Jirata (2012) revealed that story telling in class was beneficial to the children's emotional development in preschool<sup>[7]</sup>. Shahriarpour and Kafi (2014) found that using digital games did motivate the learners toward learning and made them interested<sup>[8]</sup>. According to Deubel (2006), it was helpful to have digital game-based learning since it could motivate learners in long-term memory<sup>[3]</sup>.

In addition, others researchers highlight the role of play in vocabulary learning.

There are some researchers who have worked on game-based vocabulary learning. Alemi (2010), for example, conducted an investigation of the role of using word games in expanding the learner's vocabulary, showing that learners could integrate different words or meaning differently from their perspective<sup>[9]</sup>. Nair, Yusof, and Arumugam (2014) stated that the play method significantly improved the mastery of vocabulary and interest in learning the Malay Language among the pupils<sup>[11]</sup>. Through play, children learn how to be independent, knowledgeable and how to make application of new vocabulary. Dewey (1939) highlighted that teachers were encouraged to employ play method to attract the pupils' attention during the process of learning language and vocabulary<sup>[10]</sup>.

Learning through play, as an important part in the field of language education, has drawn the attention of many scholars<sup>[10,11]</sup>. However, most of the previous researches focus on the relationship between play and teaching method, motivation, interest and vocabulary learning, just as what has discussed in precious part. In addition, a considerable amount of research has been carried out on the play in the class<sup>[5,7,12]</sup>. Meanwhile, there are also some searches on the play outside class, such as Lehtonen (2017), conducted a study on law students learning English beyond language classroom, showing that learners could certainly learn English much faster at work than from a textbook<sup>[13]</sup>.

But at present, no comparable research on the role of play with local kids in the English development of Chinese children in the Philippines. It is necessary for language researchers to conduct more studies on it.

The current study, therefore, aims to fill in this gap by exploring how the two Chinese children develop speaking and listening skills in English in the process of play with local kids in the Philippines. In the following sections, "play" means "play with the local kids".

The study tries to answer the following questions:

(a) Is "play" beneficial to improving English listening comprehensive ability?

(b) Is "play" a key role in enhancing their confidence to speak English?

(c) Does "play" motivate the two young Chinese children to Speak English?

Taking an ethnographically based approach which allows the researchers both to observe the participants and to elicit their opinions through informal interviews, the research investigated the role of "play" in the English development of two Chinese children.

The results of the study will hopefully not only benefit L2 teachers in the preschool but also provide supports for the development of second language acquisition of children.

In this paper, after the introduction, I will explain the data collection and data analysis, then give a detailed analysis of the results of the study. The last part of the paper will end the discussion with conclusion.

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Participants

The research is realized on my two children who are twins, Kaikai (son) and Xinxin (daughter). They have been growing together since they are born in China in 2013. My husband works in a company and I am an English teacher in a university in China. My mother, who doesn't know English, helps me to take care of my two children.

When they are 4 years and 8 months old, they came to the Philippines with me and my mother. Now, they have been staying in the Philippines for about 7 months. I speak both English and Chinese to my kids at home. Both of them like to go to the kindergarten in the Philippines. And they love to make different friends. They like to play with their classmates.

### 2.2 Data gathering

The empirical data in this study are drawn from 4 months (from January to April in 2019) of ethnographic field work in different situations in the Philippines. The fieldwork includes observation, participant observation and informal interviews. The six kids playing with my two children are classmates whose backgrounds are presented in Table 1. Hence, I am easy to contact with their parents. I tell them my purpose and they agree to give signature on the consent form. And I blend observations with inform

interviews which are recorded by my notebook. Then I collect data by video and note-takings. Ultimately, I pick up 50 hours of video and 120 pieces of note-takings as the valid data which would be analyzed in the present study.

The participants were observed from the followings:  
 (a) Different places: home, school, church, clubhouse;  
 (b) Different activities: singing and dancing, playing games, swimming, play sand, play ball, birthday party, and free play.

**Table 1.** Background of Six Kids

| Number | Name        | Age | Gender | English Proficiency |
|--------|-------------|-----|--------|---------------------|
| 1      | Nette       | 5   | Girl   | Good                |
| 2      | Mart        | 5   | Boy    | Good                |
| 3      | Margarettes | 4   | Girl   | Not So Good         |
| 4      | Amber       | 6   | Girl   | Very Good           |
| 5      | Loverly     | 6   | Girl   | Very Good           |
| 6      | Chloe       | 6   | Girl   | Very Good           |

### 2.3 Data analysis

I process the material with qualitative data analysis method. Punch (2005) pointed that: “Coding is an initial and major process for the analysis gravitated towards discovering the content of the data in the qualitative analysis” (p. 193)<sup>[14]</sup>. Firstly, all the videos are transcribed into words and put into tables. Then, the data in the note-takings are categorized. Next, the researcher presents the data according to the research questions. Lastly, the data are divided into three periods according to the performance of the twins’ spoken English during the process of playing with the local kids.

Period 1: January: speak a little with my help

Period 2: February: speak a little without my help

Period 3: March to April: speak more actively sometimes with my help

In order to facilitate clear, accurate, and comprehensive tabulation of records, the data are coded respectively as follows:

The time is written in the sequence of year, month and date;

Three periods are numbered sequentially and coded as P1 for period one, P2 for period two, and P3 for period three

The activity places are coded as H for home, S for school, U for church, C for clubhouse and O for outside;

The data sources are coded as V for video, N for note-taking.

The two kids’ respective “play” activities (Kaikai has 200 times while Xinxin has 220 times) are numbered sequentially and coded as K1 for the first “play” activity by Kaikai and X1 for the first activity by Xinxin, and so

forth.

All the “play” activities are numbered in sequence from K1 to K 220, X1 to X 210, respectively followed by the period, the time, the place, and the source.

For example, K1-P1-20190112-U-V, it means that Kaikai’s first “play” activity which is recorded in video happens in church during period one on January 12, 2019. Major development stages of hybrid-styled teaching of college English courses

Under hybrid-styled teaching of college English, the teaching modes can be roughly divided into three stages: the theoretical and discussion stage, the exploration and implementation stage, and the new application stage. The time boundaries between the three stages are not well-defined.

The first stage is the theoretical and discussion stage. This stage occurred from 2004 to 2006. During this stage, college English teaching was associated with hybrid-styled teaching, and demonstrates the inherent tendency of the fusion of the two, so as to introduce the concept of hybrid-styled teaching in college English. A theoretical discussion on the hybrid-styled teaching of English language was conducted, and the advantages of combining the teaching methods involving human teacher and high-tech products were presented. Whether the traditional teacher-centered or current student-centered approach possesses more advantages was also discussed. The hybrid-styled English teaching has become an inevitable trend in the context of Internet development. This stage did not involve the actual teaching practice, but focused on the theoretical discussion of the hybrid-styled English teaching.

The second stage is the exploration and implementation stage. This stage occurred from 2006

to 2014. As early as March 2006, experts introduced hybrid-styled teaching mode for English listening courses, which kick started the hybrid-style teaching for English courses. In the following ten years, experts have implemented hybrid-styled teaching methods in many courses, such as audiovisual English, college English speaking, college English writing, and so on. This stage is known as the exploration and implementation stage because it is a simple combination of Internet technology and traditional teaching, and it does not involve much research.

The third stage is the new application stage. This stage occurred from 2015 to the present. In the new era of society, the Internet has become the mainstream technology, and the hybrid-styled teaching mode has also been redefined with the inclusion of mobile technology. Therefore, the hybrid-styled teaching method already integrates Internet, mobile communication equipment, classroom discussion and integrative teaching. In 2015, MOOC and Flipped Classroom were explored in depth, and they were known as the new hybrid-styled teaching model. The

hybrid-styled teaching model has stepped into another phase of development. The targets of research are MOOC, Weike, SPOC, mobile apps, flipped classroom, and so on.

### 3 Results and discussion

A thorough and rigorous reading and analysis of the transcriptions of 50 hours of video and 120 pieces of note-takings of informal interview from January to April in 2019 results in several themes which are presented in this section under three cardinal categories, namely Listening Comprehension, Confidence of Speaking and Motivation of learning.

#### 3.1 The role of “Play” in improving English listening comprehension

To explore the role of “play” in improving the two children’s listening comprehensive ability in English, the researcher makes a total summary of the successful communications by themselves in the three periods. The following table shows the frequency of their successful communications.

**Table 2.** Summary of Successful Communications

|        | Frequency |     |     | Total |
|--------|-----------|-----|-----|-------|
|        | P1        | P2  | P3  |       |
| Kaikai | 20        | 55  | 115 | 190   |
| Xinxin | 22        | 56  | 107 | 185   |
| Total  | 45        | 111 | 222 | 375   |

As shown in Table 1, the total frequency of successful communication with local kids is 375, occupying 87% in the corpora of “play” activities which is 430. That is to say, in most cases, Kaikai and Xinxin can give right responses to their partners’ inquiry without my help when they play with the local kids. Although they can’t express themselves in English all the time, they can understand what their partners say. They understand more than they speak. The reasons may be as follows:

Firstly, the twins can “guess” the meaning through the partners’ nonverbal behaviors when they play together, such as nod head, smile, frown, etc.

Example 1(coming from K10-P1-20190118-C-V)

Kaikai is playing sand with Margarettes and Mart, digging a big hole for their toy cars. Mart points to the tree and says to Kaikai: “Kaikai, let’s climb the tree.” Kaikai looks at him and turns his head to the tree which is crowded by other kids. Then he shakes his head and

continues digging the hole.

In this example, Kaikai knows the meaning of “tree” and understands the invitation with the help of Mart’s gesture. He doesn’t say anything in English but “shakes his head” to express his rejection.

Secondly, the twins not only learn some words and phrases from the partners but also know how to use accurately.

Example 2(coming from K12-P1-20190120-H-N)

Kaikai is playing his toy Ultraman on the desk. Then it falls down from the desk. He screams loudly: “Oh, No!”

Mummy: “Where do you learn this phrase?”

Kaikai: “Yesterday, cars fall down, Mart say.”(Mart said it when our toy cars fall down from the desk.)

In this example, Kaikai learns the phrase and the situation from his partner, Mart. When the same case happens, he uses it appropriately.

Thirdly, the twins can “infer” the meaning through

some familiar words.

Example 3(coming from X68-P2-20190215-S-N)

Outside the classroom, Kids are playing the game of “hide and seek”. Xinxin hides behind me. Amber looks at me and seeks her.

Amber: “Oh! I seek you, number one, Xinxin. Because I look at your dress, your pink dress. I also like the pink ones. I have so many pink toys in my house. You can play with me and Lovely. You can come to my house on Sunday.”

Xinxin is happy and hugs her excitedly. At night, Xinxin tells her grandmother in Chinese that she can go to Amber’s house to play.

Mummy: “Which day?”

Xinxin: “Sunday.”

Mummy: “Why do you know that she invite you to her house?”

Xinxin: “She says ‘pink, dress, toys, house, Lovely, Sunday’, so I know.”

In this example, I think that Xinxin doesn’t understand since Amber says a lot. But she gets it by some familiar words which may be discussed between them. And she gives Amber a big hug, showing that she understands it.

### 3.2 The role of “Play” in enhancing confidence of speaking English

To find out the role of “play” in developing confidence of the twins when speaking English, the researcher explores the frequency of seeking help(It means the times of asking me for help during the “play” activities) and the degree of spoken English(It means the degree of fluency) in each period. The following table shows the results.

**Table 3.** Frequency of Seeking Help and Degree of the Spoken English

| Frequency |     | Degree                                |
|-----------|-----|---------------------------------------|
| P1        | 80  | Always turn to me; Less fluent        |
| P2        | 50  | Often turn to me ; Fluent sometimes   |
| P3        | 20  | Sometimes turn to me; A little fluent |
| Total     | 150 |                                       |

As shown in Table 3, in period one, the total frequency of seeking help is 80, occupying 53% in the total seeking help which is 150 while in period three, it is 20, occupying 13%. That is to say, in period 1, the twins always turn to Mummy because they are not sure what they say is right or not, or they dare not say, or they don’t know how to say. While in period 3, they have more confidence to speak because they find that most of times they can successfully communicate each other no matter what they say. What’s more, according to the characteristics showed in Table 3, in period 1, the twins always ask for some help, such as “Mummy, how to say?” “Mummy, I dare not say” “Mummy, you speak to them” “Mummy, you tell them for me” etc. while, in period 3, they can solve some problems by themselves although there are some mistakes in their speaking. They become more confident to speak English with less worries. According to the analysis, observation and informal interview, the research summarizes the reasons as follows:

Firstly, the twins dare to speak more after they are more familiar with the six kids. Hence they are freer to communicate gradually. With more and more “play”

activities with the six kids, the twins don’t regard them as “foreigners” but “classmates” and “friends”.

Example 4(coming from K150-P3-20190312-O-V)

Kaikai, Xinxin and Chloe are playing the game “running with a balloon.” Three local kids come here and they join the game, too. Then all of them play together, however, every time when they need to communicate, Kaikai says to Chloe without speaking to the other kids. I ask him why he doesn’t speak to the others. Kaikai tells me that he dare not say to them because they are strange foreigners.

Secondly, the twins earn confidence when they communicate successfully during the “play” activities. They find that, without my help, they also can solve some problems with the partners. They can make themselves understood no matter with or without language.

Example 5(coming from K180-P3-20190326-S-N)

At night, Kaikai asks me whether I can buy more Ultraman stickers for him. I ask why he needs so many. He tells me he has sold them to his classmates, and he has promised to take more to them. I am surprised to hear that.

Mummy: “How do you sell your stickers?”

Kaikai: “1 peso 1 small, 5 peso 1 medium, 10 peso 1 big.”(One peso you get a small one, five pesos you can get a medium one, ten pesos you can get a big one.)

Mummy: “You can send these stickers to your friends without money. I can buy some for you.”

Kaikai: “No, Mart and I like this game.”

In example 5, in Kaikai’s mind, it’s just like a game. And he successfully finishes the exchange with his classmates without my help. He can communicate by himself and he wants to continue. He gains some confidence.

Thirdly, the more English they acquire, the more confidence they have. Most of time, they don’t speak English because they don’t know how to say. Once they know how to express themselves in English, they have less anxiety.

Example 6(coming from X90-P2-20190220-O-V)

We are playing a game of “guessing the colour” with Nette, Mart and Margatettes. I take out a chocolate bean from a bag, then kids have a guess what the color is. The kid who gets it will be given one as prize for contest.

I: “What color is it? One, two, three, go.”

Nette: “Yellow.”

Mart: “Red.”

Margatettes: “Green.”

Kaikai: “Black.”

Xinxin keeps silent and looks unhappy.

I ask Xinxin why she has no answer. She points her finger to my coat and says: “Mummy, I don’t know this color.” I tell her it is brown.

Xinxin says immediately and loudly: “Brown.”

Then I open my hand.

I: “Yes, brown, Xinxin, you get it. Terrific!”

Xinxin is so happy that she jumps and repeats “brown” loudly with pride.

### 3.3 The role of “Play” in motivating speaking English

In order to explore the role of “play” activities in motivating the two kids to speak English, the researcher make a summary of the times(It means the times of speaking) and amounts (It means the quantity of the utterances) of spoken English of the twins in three periods. The following table shows the summary.

**Table 4.** Times of Spoken English

| Times  |     | Total  | Percentage |       |
|--------|-----|--------|------------|-------|
| Kaikai |     | Xinxin |            |       |
| P1     | 20  | 18     | 38         | 7%    |
| P2     | 80  | 70     | 150        | 27.5% |
| P3     | 189 | 169    | 358        | 65.5% |
| Total  | 289 | 257    | 546        |       |

**Table 5.** Amounts of Utterances

| Length                                   | Amounts |     | Percentage |     |
|--|---------|-----|------------|-----|
|  | P1      | P2  | P3         |     |
| Less than 3 words                        | 30      | 100 | 100        | 42% |
| More than 3 words<br>(including 3 words) | 8       | 50  | 258        | 58% |

As shown in Table 4, in period one, the total a time of speaking English is 38, occupying 7% in the total corpora which is 546. However, in period three, the total times is 358, occupying 65.5%. That is to say, during the “play” activities, the twins speak seldom English in period one while they speak more in period three.

As we can see from table 5, in period 1, the amounts of utterances which are more than 3 words(including

3 words) are 8, occupying 1.5%. While in period 3, it is 258, occupying 47%. From period 1 to 3, both the quantity and length are increasing. In another word, with the “play” activities going by, the twins are willing to speak more utterances which are longer.

Based on observation and informal interview, the research makes a summary of the reasons as follows:

Firstly, “play” activities create strong enterprising spirit of the twins for English learning. They want to do

what their partners do.

Example 7(coming from X180-P3-20190329-H-V)

At Amber's house, Amber and Loverly are humming an English song as they do the handwork with Kaikai and Xinxin.

Xinxin comes to me.

Mummy: "Amber and Loverly sing what song?"(What do they sing?)

Mummy: "I taught you the song yesterday, but you were unwilling to follow. It sounds good, yes?"

Xinxin: "Yes.

Mummy: "Do you want to learn?"

Xinxin: "Yes, like as Amber and Loverly."

In this example, Amber and Loverly set a good example for Xinxin. She wants to do what they do, which is the different case she had refused to follow when I required her to do.

Secondly, "play" activities make them be more interested in English learning.

Example 8(coming from K190-P3-20190408-H-N)

Kaikai finishes drawing three pictures. Then he comes to me.

Kaikai: "Mummy, can you help me?"

Mummu: "What?"

Kaikai: "Make story. This is Mart. This is Nette. This is I."

In this example, Kaikai asks me to write some words on the picture to make a story for him. The story is about his playing partners.

The above description and analysis of data has firstly shown that in "play" activities, young children can have a better understanding of English communications with the help of nonverbal behaviors. This finding seems to be consistent with the results of Muchemwa (2013) who indicated that non-verbal signs can manifest communicative intentions and emotions<sup>[15]</sup>. Using gestures and body language are very effective for young learners to gain understanding of language. Meanwhile, Eberle (2011) came to a conclusion that in the play activities, children are easier to understand others, learn to cooperate each other and engage in socially appropriate behavior<sup>[16]</sup>.

Secondly, young children are likely to be more confident to speak English in the "play" activities with their partners who make them less anxious. This findings are almost consistent with the study conducted by Bodrova, Germeroth, and Leong (2013) who held that social play allows children to become more successful at manipulating different symbol

systems, and more confident when experimenting with new activities<sup>[17]</sup>. Similarly, Ansari(2015) and Al Hosni(2014) conducted a study on speaking anxiety in ESL/EFL classrooms, finding that speaking anxiety is the major cause that leads and contributes to learner's language acquisition<sup>[18,19]</sup>.

Thirdly, young children can be motivated to speak English by "play" activities. They learn and imitate what the partners do. Just as Gardner (1985) pointed that having a positive attitude towards the second language community and a strong desire to become a part of that community is a good way to enhance the motivation to learn a second language<sup>[20]</sup>. Cunningham (1999) also admits that children have to be placed in situations where they have no choice but to communicate in English<sup>[21]</sup>. Similarly, Hashim, Yunus, and Embi (2016) showed in their study that learning a language shouldn't be limited only in the classroom but also in a natural conversational environment<sup>[22]</sup>.

## 4 Conclusion

Taking case study approach, the researcher explored the case of two Chinese children living and studying in the Philippines, making an attempt to make contributions to a better understanding of the process of second language acquisition of young children. Based on the data, the study has the following conclusions:

Firstly, "play" activities do help young children in English listening comprehension, with the help of nonverbal communication.

Secondly, young children have more confidence to speak English in "play" activities because they feel less anxious.

Thirdly, "play" activities do motivate young children to speak English because they want to be what the partners are.

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